The Revenge of Women
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When the pursuit of a female utopia leads to a cruel, dehumanized reality, the last survivors of the old world must fight for the right to love—and to exist.

Synopsis

A dystopian future —or perhaps a utopian one?— where the tenets of radical feminism have been pushed to their absolute limits. Men are at a clear disadvantage, actively marginalized and replaced at every level by "empowered" women.

This is the story of two generations witnessing the evolution of an overwhelmingly female society, where the few women who choose to have offspring do so through selective artificial insemination to ensure they only have daughters. Men watch helplessly as they are relegated to second-class citizens, while the few boys born are subjected to ‘recommended procedures’ to prevent the resurgence of the dreaded ‘phallocentric’ culture.

Only small, underground groups of Christians remain, accused of hate crimes and facing a persecution more relentless than that of Nero’s time.

Yet, there is still reason for hope. Love, the world’s true engine, will fight with determination to break through a dehumanized society that has become cruel, despotic, and filled with hatred.

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Part One – Angel Face

The Boss

I'd reluctantly agreed to go out that night with one of my roommates from the apartment I was living in. The wildest one, naturally.

Lucy had recently joined a crew, and there was this guy who was "super-hot," in her words. She'd been chasing him for a while, but so far, she hadn't managed to get him to see her as anything more than a friend. "Come on, come with me and meet him, see what you think."

I tried to convince her I wasn't interested—among other things, I had a tough exam the next week. But no dice. Deep down, I've always had the same problem: I can't say no. "Come on, maybe you'll meet one of the other guys—they're not bad either." In her own way, she was telling me that I, naive and innocent as I was, couldn't aim for *that* guy and should settle for one of the others.

We got to the bar where this crew hung out almost every evening, and sure enough, there he was—Victor. There he was with his blue eyes, dark hair slicked back, piercing gaze, and an arm covered in tattoos. A mix of Tom Cruise and Patrick Swayze, but taller and more jacked.

Victor, the alpha male of the pack, who they also called "the boss" and, more often, "Khaki," after the khaki color of the military uniform he usually wore—either in that camouflage shade or navy blue.

Lucy wasn't wrong when she described him, and I'll admit, my jaw practically hit the floor when I saw him.

The boss was flirting with Carmen at that moment, the only girl in the group who didn't give him the time of day, the only one who still resisted him. And that was probably why he paid her more attention than the others.

That was Victor: a misfit, a rebel, a touch violent (only with guys), a troublemaker, captivating, charming… irresistible.

And me? Well, I was like Sandy meeting Danny in *Grease*. I even looked like her—blonde, prim, eyes downcast, a convent schoolgirl who'd never been touched.

I was in my fourth year of law school, and that year was a real challenge.

I'd started college like most girls, at 18. My parents scraped together the money for my tuition, and for the first three years, I lived with the Clarist nuns, the same ones who'd taught me in school years before.

When I moved to the city from my small town, my life was pretty dull. I barely talked to anyone, and every day was the same. Mornings at the law school, afternoons in the dorm, doing nothing but studying.

But in my fourth year, everything changed. The nuns, strapped for cash, shut down the dorm, and I had to find an apartment with other girls from school. Fate landed me with Lucy and Clara, two girls who were nothing like my old, equally innocent (or more so) roommates.

And, predictably, my grades took a hit. I'd gone from acing everything to slipping, even failing a class or two. It was a miracle I passed anything at all, because studying in that apartment was impossible. Lucy and Clara were still in their second year, with some first-year classes still pending. Every day was a party at our place, and even with my door closed and earplugs in, focusing was a lost cause.

So I gave in and went out with them, if only to see this supposedly amazing guy they couldn't stop talking about at home.

And just like in *Grease* with Danny and Sandy, the moment I walked into the bar, he noticed me and broke away from the group to come say:

"Hey! I'm Victor. You are?"

"Olivia," I replied, blushing to the max, barely able to look up.

"You've got such beautiful eyes," he said, and that's when I melted on the spot.

“You too,” I mumbled, but he didn’t hear me. One of the girls had just shown up and grabbed his arm, turning him around:

“Hey! You gonna finish that story or what?”

He grinned and stepped away, heading back to where he’d left the others. But before he did, he grabbed my hand and pulled me along with him.

There were three tables loaded with drinks in a corner of the bar. Victor was in the middle, spinning some story that was probably made up. But everyone was cracking up at his antics, the girls especially. There were eight or ten of us, guys and girls, though a couple of pairs weren’t paying much attention—they were too busy making out and groping each other practically on top of me.

That October 20th was a turning point in my life. Looking back now, after all these years, I sometimes wonder if I should’ve told Lucy no and stayed home studying. Told her I didn’t need to go out with guys, that I just wanted to be a criminal lawyer, that I wasn’t interested in living life with a capital “L,” which is what I started doing from that day on.

But then again, if I’d done that, I wouldn’t have met him—the person who shaped my life, for better or worse, from that moment forward.

Senior Year

My fourth year of college was a total disaster—I completely lost my way. In the end, I let myself get swept up, and I was almost always tagging along with Lucy to the Khan, the bar where Victor's crew hung out, a crew I was now part of. Sometimes I even went alone if she couldn't come with me for whatever reason.

The only thing I figured out in all that time was that I had no clue what was going on there. On one hand, all the girls claimed they'd hooked up with the boss at some point, though I thought most of it was just big talk, as exaggerated as the stories he told. Because, in reality, Victor only had eyes for Carmen, a skinny Latina girl who wasn't nearly as stunning as the others. The only thing that set her apart was her apparent indifference to him, to Khaki, as everyone called him.

Lucy definitely didn't achieve her goal of getting him into bed. As for me, I can say—at least it seemed this way—that Victor stopped a couple of guys from hitting on me. Or maybe that was just my imagination, because I had no intention of letting any of them charm me.

When the year ended, I left the apartment and spent the summer with my parents, trying to forget everything that had happened in that wild, unusual year, so different from all the others in my life.

The next year, my family's finances improved a bit, and they could afford to rent me a modest apartment where I lived alone, with the goal of finally finishing my degree.

I tried to keep a low profile and avoid even passing by the Khan, but it was pointless. In a world ruled by social media, you're always trackable, and soon enough, they not only knew I was back but also where I lived. I'd spent the whole summer saying I was staying in my hometown and not returning to the city, but it didn't matter.

Things went back to how they were before, or close to it. The only thing stopping my tiny apartment from becoming another party spot was its size.

The big news this time was that Victor and Carmen were finally an official couple. Or so it seemed, even though both of them kept flirting with other people in the crew nonstop.

A Rebel

Victor had a rough childhood. His dad bailed on the family when he was just two, leaving him and his newborn brother with their mom, who had to raise them with next to no money. It was tough for all three, and as you'd expect, things got messy when Victor and his brother hit puberty. Without a father figure around, they were aggressive with their classmates, and their mom had her hands full dealing with their bad grades and constant expulsions from school.

Luckily, by their early 20s, both settled down. His younger brother got a girlfriend pregnant young, and against everyone's expectations, he stepped up, took responsibility for the baby, and threw himself into a job to support his new family.

Victor, meanwhile, found work as a cop, of all things. After yet another trip to the station for one of his many street fights, one of the officers saw he wasn't a bad kid deep down and suggested, "Join the force. That way you can hit people legally."

And that's what he did. He was in great shape and passed the physical tests easily. The written exams too—he wasn't dumb and studied harder than he ever had, discovering he wasn't half bad at it.

Right after passing, they sent him to riot control, where he got his fill of cracking down on rowdy protesters—there were always plenty. He was always on the front line, and unlike his colleagues, he wanted someone to act up so he could go all out. And he did, especially during the protests after laws were passed that favored women over men. "I'm a feminist to the core," he'd say. "For me, women come first."

Later, driven by his passion for motorcycles, he got transferred to Traffic. That's where he found his place—nothing in the world beat riding the roads with Oscar, his usual partner, on a 500cc BMW Trail.

When he wasn't on duty, he spent mornings at the gym with Martin and Samuel, his loyal crew lieutenants who'd nicknamed him "the boss."

His life boiled down to the same routine: gym, shifts, and flirting at Khan in the evenings. Whenever girls were around, his natural charm kicked in—playful, suggestive—and I wasn't spared the winks he gave everyone else. I'd gotten them the previous year, but now they were more persistent, like I'd changed somehow, or maybe he had.

And that was weird, because last year he wasn't dating anyone, and this year, at least in theory, he was with Carmen.

Seduction

From the moment I met him, just like I imagine happened with the other girls, Victor was a kind of "platonic love." He was the ultimate "hot guy," the embodiment of masculinity, the kind of man you think about on a sleepless night.

We all flocked around him just to be near him, to hear his stories, because he was insanely charming. The Khan meetups were nothing and fizzled out fast when Khaki wasn't there.

But the problem was, he was already with Carmen, probably the "alpha female" of the group, and no one dared challenge her reign.

That's why what happened that day caught me completely off guard, though, to be honest, there were already signs pointing that way.

It was a Tuesday. I remember it clearly, just like I remember what I was wearing. Unlike the year before, I'd ditched my prim, oversized dresses and started dressing like the other girls in the crew. That afternoon, I had on tight jeans and a fitted tank top that, I'll admit, showed off my breasts quite a bit.

Carmen wasn't there that day, and the boss was in a mood. He seemed annoyed for some reason, not his usual witty self, just sipping his usual rum and orange, sitting quietly in a corner while the other guys took over telling jokes and stories to make us laugh.

After a while, I got up to leave. Exams were coming up, and I didn't want to stay out too late.

But as soon as I stepped outside, the boss followed me and started hitting on me, inviting me to his place.

"But, Khaki, how can we do that? What'll Carmen think if she finds out we were there, just the two of us?"

"I don't care what she thinks. Why should I? Why do you?"

"But she's your girlfriend… isn't she?"

“We broke up,” he said flatly.

“Seriously?” I was stunned. Just the day before, they’d been all over each other, kissing and joking around nonstop.

“You really broke up?”

Without answering, he pulled me close and gave me a smile that could’ve melted the toughest woman.

“Look, Olivia, you’re the most interesting girl in the whole group. From the moment I saw you that day, October 20—” he remembered the exact date! “—I knew you’d be mine sooner or later. I couldn’t get you out of my head!” he lied, smooth as ever. “I would’ve gone out with you if you hadn’t left for the summer. That’s why I got with Carmen. But that’s over now.”

I was floored and didn’t believe a word.

“But what do I have?”

“Such a beautiful face,” he said with his most captivating smile, and then he kissed me. He kissed me, and I kissed him back, melting into a passionate kiss where time stopped for me.

And somehow, in the blink of an eye, I found myself at his place, unable and unwilling to resist making love with him.

First Time

I was never scared of my first time. A lot of girls talked about pain, uncomfortable feelings… That wasn’t my experience at all. It was a pleasurable first time, full of tenderness and beautiful emotions, because he treated me with such care. I didn’t even bleed.

It was Victor who seemed uneasy, smoking his usual cigarette afterward. He was restless, distant, like he regretted what he’d done.

“You’ve never been with a virgin before?” I asked, trying to break the ice.

“Oh, yeah! Tons of times!” His face relaxed, back to his usual self. “They call me the can opener. Didn’t you know?”

“The can opener? Who calls you that?”

“Everyone in the crew.”

“Come on, Khaki, don’t brag,” I said, always using his nickname like everyone else did.

“No, seriously! I’m not kidding! Look, Martin had this issue with his girlfriend. Not Laura, but one he was with before.”

“What was the problem?”

“The guy got nervous when they were about to do it. You know, he couldn’t… get it up,” he whispered, and I laughed. “Plus, she was ‘really tight’—a virgin and nervous too, so, you know, no way! So, he asked if I could ‘open the can,’ get it?” I burst out laughing. “It’s normal, Olivia,” he went on. “Some girls need to be ‘unclogged,’ you know, someone to ‘open the can,’ and then after that, it’s smooth sailing.”

We both cracked up, and I pictured Martin trying and failing.

“Come on, Khaki, I don’t buy it,” I said, still laughing, and he finally admitted:

“Alright, fine. It wasn’t exactly like that. The problem was real, but he didn’t ask me. I was the one who suggested it.”

“And he agreed? I mean, did she want to…”

“Nah,” he laughed. “But I swear, Martin thought about it for a second before saying no.”

We laughed again, and I got up to get dressed.

“You’re leaving already?” he asked. “Don’t you want to spend the night? I promise more wild passion and intense orgasms,” he whispered, and honestly, I was tempted to stay.

“I can’t, Khaki. I’m expecting a call from my parents.”

“Didn’t you bring your phone?”

“Yeah, but we usually do long video calls, and I doubt they’d believe my camera’s broken.”

“Well, just tell them where you are, and I’ll introduce myself.”

“Uh… bad idea. My parents are kinda traditional, so… I’ll introduce you when the time’s right.”

I finished dressing, grabbed my shoes, fixed my hair a bit, and got ready to leave. He offered to walk me home, but I refused. We lived close by, and I didn’t want my neighbors to see me. They knew my parents and might tell them.

So he just walked me to the door, and before I left, I said:

“Another day, you can do all that stuff you promised. Deal?”

“I promise!”

We kissed, and I walked down the street, practically skipping. I felt like a kid whose parents had just promised a trip to Disneyland. I was bursting with joy, overwhelmed by happiness.

Two Unpleasant Calls

When my parents called, I was the one who was distracted. More than once, my mom had to say, “Olivia, are you listening? What’s wrong?” And I’d reply, “Nothing, Mom, I’m just a bit tired.” Which was true. Plus, I kept kicking myself for not staying the night with him, especially since my mom was only talking about trivial stuff.

But that was just the setup for what came next. When my dad got on, he dropped the bomb: he’d been fired.

“But they just promoted you! That’s how we could afford my apartment…”

“A change in the company’s management, Olivia. And since my salary was higher now, firing me saves them a lot.”

“Don’t worry, Dad. You’ll find something. You’re a great programmer, and…”

“It’s tough, Olivia. My age is working against me.”

“Well, I’ll work for you. I’ll drop out and—”

“No, Olivia! Absolutely not! I’ve already talked to some friends, and if I don’t find a job, I’m thinking about installing fiber optic cables. It’s hard work, mostly outdoors, but I’m still strong, and it pays well.”

“Yeah, but…”

“I don’t want to hear you talk about dropping out again. Got it?”

“Okay, but at least I could move in with other girls. Renting a room isn’t the same as a whole apartment.”

“No. Besides, we paid your rent for the year upfront. The money’s already spent. Don’t worry, Olivia. We’ll get through this!”

That call ruined the sweet moment I was in. Still, I wasn’t too worried. At worst, my mom’s nursing salary could keep the family afloat, though they’d have to pull my sister out of her school and find a cheaper one.

Honestly, my dad was resourceful and would likely find something. It wasn’t the first time he’d left a job for a better one.

I was more upset by another call the next morning—one that hit me harder.

“Hey, Olivia.” It was Lucy, my old roommate. “How’s it going?”

“Fine.”

“Got anything to tell me? Huh? What happened last night?”

“How do you know?”

“Come on, girl, we saw you leave with him.”

“Yeah, but…”

“Did you sleep with Khaki, yes or no?”

“Yes,” I said without hesitation. “Apparently, he broke up with Carmen, and…”

“Look, Olivia,” she said, her tone turning serious, “Carmen and Victor can’t break up. They’re like a drug to each other.”

“That must’ve been before. He told me straight up they’re done.”

“Yeah, and it’s probably true. But I’d bet anything they’ll get back together, sooner than you think.”

I didn’t want to believe it. After how sweet he’d been, how well he treated me… how could he go back to Carmen?

“No way,” I insisted.

“Olivia, it’s happened before, and they always get back together. It’s a toxic relationship, and Khaki always comes out losing. He’ll never leave her.”

“But why?”

“He’s hooked on her… like it’s a spell. And she’s hooked on him too, by the way. But they’re awful together. Carmen blows him off constantly, disrespects him, so he gets mad and tries to hook up with one of us out of spite. To mess with her.”

I was stunned.

“You too…”

“No, not us. If Carmen found out, she’d skin us alive. That woman’s dangerous, Olivia. You don’t know what she’s capable of.”

I felt like I might faint.

“Lucy! Why didn’t you tell me? I thought we were friends…”

There was silence on the line, and then it clicked. They’d used me as a scapegoat so Carmen would come after me, leaving the field clear for them to get closer to him.

“You’re a bitch, Lucy!” I spat with all the contempt I could muster. But she fired back.

“No, it’s not what you think,” she said. “Besides, would it have mattered? Would you have stopped yourself from sleeping with him if we’d had this talk first?”

I went quiet.

“See? He’s into you, Olivia. You’re not like us, and neither is Carmen.”

“I’m nothing like Carmen.”

“That’s not what I mean. You’re prettier, more…”

“No,” I cut her off. “I’m not.”

“Okay, maybe you don’t have Patricia’s curves or Laura’s breasts. But your face… I don’t know, there’s a grace to you, the way you move, your expression… Maybe it’s your eyes. Khaki’s always looked at you differently than the rest of us.”

“Okay, so what are you saying?”

“Be careful from now on, Olivia. What you did can’t be undone, and…”

“Are you gonna tell Carmen?”

“No. But she’s not stupid—she’ll find out. I’m just saying, be ready when that moment comes.”

Red Lipstick

That day at the university, I couldn't focus on anything. My mind was elsewhere, replaying every moment of that night with Victor and every word of my talk with Lucy.

How was it possible that my life had been so uneventful, and then, in just a few days, I'd not only slept with a guy like that but everything seemed to be going wrong?

I felt let down. It had all been so perfect, so beautiful, so magical, so ideal… it couldn't be real.

Yes, Victor was the kind of man any woman would dream of taking to bed. But like everything in life, he had to have some flaw.

I went through days of back-and-forth—moments where I was determined to cut him off completely, others where I didn't care about anything as long as he stayed with me. I was even ready to fight Carmen tooth and nail if it came to that, just to keep him by my side.

The truth is, I'd fallen in love. Who wouldn't fall for a guy like that after sleeping with him the first time? I was already smitten from the moment I saw him. But now I was drowning in doubts.

Consciously, anyway. Deep down, I knew I belonged to Victor. I was his, body and soul, and that's why I kept going to the Khan every day to see him, to be with him.

I didn't put on a leather outfit like Sandy in *Grease*, but I did wear tight leggings, a low-cut blouse, styled my hair, painted my lips bright red and my eyes blue, and adopted a more carefree attitude.

And yet, the boss had vanished. He didn't answer my calls or read my messages.

To make matters worse, Carmen was nowhere to be seen either. Was she with him? I wondered, eaten up by jealousy.

Since it was all "secret," I couldn't ask the others about it, though they did say he was probably "on duty" with the police, and Carmen… well, she was unpredictable. Sometimes she was glued to us, other times she disappeared completely.

All the girls noticed I wasn't the same anymore. Lucy, of course, knew what had happened. But the others? Had she told them? Or maybe, just like she knew, they did too? Was there a chance Carmen would find out? And if she did, what would happen?

Then, finally, on Sunday night, he showed up. I was in my apartment, in pajamas, brushing my teeth, ready to go to bed.

The buzzer rang, and I thought it was a neighbor. There'd been water supply issues that day, so I figured they were coming to talk about that.

But it was him. He showed up in his black biker pants, khaki camo shirt, and that heart-melting smile on his face.

"Hey! I'm here to keep my promise."

Unable to resist, all my doubts vanished like magic, and I threw myself into his arms, practically hanging off him, kissing him nonstop, until we ended up in bed moments later.

It was a dreamlike night where I lost count of how many times we made love. Between rounds, we talked a bit, and he was back to his goofy, sarcastic self. His promise of a night of wild passion and intense orgasms was more than fulfilled, and I had the time of my life like never before.

He told me he hadn’t called since Tuesday because he’d been away. I didn’t buy it, of course.

Sure, he had intense road patrol shifts, sometimes spending days sleeping at the station before getting a whole week off. But that didn’t stop him from calling, and it confirmed what Lucy had said: he and Carmen hadn’t broken up. They couldn’t.

Carmen

The woman I was competing with for Victor's love was fatherless, living on the outskirts of town with an alcoholic mother and an older brother, William, who provided for the family. Word was, William was mixed up in shady business, even though he was close friends with a cop: Victor.

I'd only seen him a couple of times since he wasn't part of our crew. Sometimes, when Carmen got too drunk or too unhinged—which was pretty common, since she was half-crazy—the boss would call her brother to come pick her up and take her home. Victor wasn't allowed there; her mom couldn't stand him.

Carmen didn't have a known job. She spent her time scrolling social media while blasting heavy metal, or sleeping, not caring if it was day or night. The music never stopped at her place, even when she slept, which probably contributed to her mom's drinking and their issues. I think Carmen hadn't moved in with Victor, despite his suggestions, just to keep tormenting her mom. She tortured him too, in her own way, because that was her nature, just like seduction was Victor's. Neither could stop.

Despite her love for that kind of "music," when it came to making love or dancing, she was all about salsa and bachata, her go-to rhythms with Khaki. That was Carmen in her bipolarity.

Though Latina, she wasn't short. More mestiza, about my height, but super skinny, with a gaunt, bony face and sagging breasts from never wearing a bra. Her outfit was always the same: tight jeans, a jacket, and a cotton tank top, summer or winter.

She never wore earrings, jewelry, or makeup. Her only real asset was her long, waist-length hair and those deep, dark, mysterious eyes that always hid what she was thinking.

I never saw her laugh out loud. Even at Victor's funniest jokes, she'd only manage a faint smile at best.

She was completely different from the rest of us, and maybe that's why Victor preferred her. Plus, there was a particular strange bond that went back to childhood, which I only found out about later.

Turns out, they'd known each other since they were kids.

They went to the same school, being the same age, and always had this weird obsession with each other. Even back then, they'd fight, and teachers would try to keep them apart to stop them from hitting, biting, or pulling each other's hair. But it was no use—they'd always find each other and start fighting again.

As you'd expect, they lost their virginity to each other, very young, at the start of puberty.

Then they lost touch. Victor's mom had to switch him to different schools because of his troublemaking. But they reconnected in high school, where their "love" picked back up.

That's when their current pattern formed: they'd get together, break up, sleep with other people, get back together, break up again… and so on. Eventually, Carmen started taking his infidelity harder, even though she gave him plenty of reasons to cheat.

And then I showed up, the latest collateral damage in their endless cycle.

That incredible night we spent together until dawn—he lied to me. He hadn't just come off a shift; he'd been with her.

Yeah, he'd finished his shift at noon, but they spent the afternoon together, dancing at a trendy club. Then they went to his place, where they had a big fight—I don't know why—and didn't do anything. Victor dropped her off at her place on his bike, then came to mine. From what happened after, I think she suspected he was with me. And that was a serious problem, because I wasn't just another fling or a one-off mistake like others when they fought. I was a full-fledged rival, more than any of the women who'd come before me in his life.

But knowing he was still with her didn't stop me from loving him like crazy. After that night, I thought I'd never love a man the way I loved him, even with her in the picture.

Even if I was just another of his many conquests and he'd eventually ditch me, that night he made me his again, branded me as his property, like cattle marked with fire. From then on, I knew I'd never belong to another man. No one could measure up. Even if I had to share him with Carmen, I'd be his—or no one's.

Reconciliation

As usual after a fight, one of them would go looking for the other. This time, it was Carmen who went to find him, only to discover he wasn't at his apartment. Bad sign. She made a few calls and drew her own conclusions.

She was leaving his building when she saw him pull up. She was crossing the small garden around the apartment complex when she heard the unmistakable roar of his Harley and turned around.

The boss wasn't exactly in top shape after the wild night he'd spent with me.

"Where you coming from, huh?"

Her presence caught him off guard, and he didn't know what to say.

"Uh… I was with Oscar."

"Liar," she hissed, clenching her teeth. "Your partner spent the night with his girlfriend. What, you guys have a threesome?"

"Fine, I was at the Orbe," he improvised. "Got a problem with that?"

She smirked sarcastically and said:

"Alright, Khaki, you just confirmed you were with a girl. Otherwise, you'd have said from the start you were at that bar. Who was it? Huh? Who were you with? *Angel face*?"

"Angel face?"

"Yeah, Olivia! They saw you leave with her on Tuesday!"

The boss went pale, even more than he already was.

"How can you think I'd… Besides, that chick's a prude. Everyone knows it," he said, looking away.

"She's *angel face*. You can't fool me. I've seen you getting real close to her lately."

“That’s all in your head.”

“Oh, the others imagined you leaving with her on Tuesday too?”

“Tuesday, I just walked her home.”

“So you tried to hook up with her, but she didn’t let you. Right?”

Victor didn’t answer.

“Come on, tell me who you were with tonight.”

Khaki sighed and finally said:

“Fine. Tonight, I was at the Orbe trying to hook up. Happy now? I wouldn’t have done it if you hadn’t ditched me yesterday,” he shot back. “Besides, I’ll be with whoever I damn well please, you hear me? Whoever I want! Olivia, Lucy, Laura, Patricia, anyone. Got it? And if you don’t like it, deal with it or find another guy. Clear enough?”

Carmen gave a sly smile, stepped close, her lips brushing his.

“You’ll be with who I let you,” she whispered. “And none of those girls, or whoever you slept with tonight, have my permission. Got that?”

“I like it when you get all dominant,” he grinned, grabbing her backside.

“I know.”

They kissed, and she immediately started groping him, a clear sign she wanted to hook up. But he wasn’t in the best shape after his night with me. So he said:

“Only now, I’m the one who doesn’t want to.”

She smiled again and added:

“Come on, Khaki, I know you’ve still got something left for me,” she groped him again in the same spot. “You’re not gonna give it to me?” She gave him that look only she could, and they kissed again, even more passionately, before heading inside.

After giving it his all with me, it seems he still had something left for his favorite.

The jealousy strategy worked, at least for a while. Carmen softened, and they got even closer for a time, barely showing up around us. That should’ve been my chance to forget him, focus on studying, and finish my degree. But I couldn’t get him out of my head. I couldn’t focus because now *I* was the jealous one.

Still, their romance didn’t last long. Those two were doomed to fight and make up forever, trapped in an endless cycle of love and hate that consumed them and defined their lives. Then I showed up—*angel face*—as a twist of fate to break the spell, to end the curse devouring them.

I, *angel face*, was doomed to watch it all unfold, powerless, always caught in the middle, serving as Victor’s shoulder to cry on, his mistress, his outlet, every time things went awry between those two lovers.

Sobriety Checkpoint

The car didn't stop—it blew through the breathalyzer checkpoint and sped off. But the officer was on it, hopping onto his bike and chasing after it relentlessly.

The BMW roared with the full power of its 500-plus cubic centimeters, flying over the ground, and it didn't take long to catch up to the fleeing vehicle.

The car had no choice but to pull over, and the officer saw that its occupants were just a couple of terrified teenagers. The driver rolled down the window, looking scared out of his mind, and the cop didn't hesitate to draw his gun and threaten him aggressively.

"Get out of the car!" he shouted. "Get out, you damn bastard!"

The kid was petrified, barely able to open the door. The officer holstered his weapon, grabbed the kid by the shoulders, and yanked him out through the window.

He held the boy in the air for a moment, and the kid pissed himself. Like a rag doll, the cop spun him around and slammed him against the car, twisting his arm.

The kid was screaming in pain, and the officer might've broken his arm if someone hadn't stepped in.

"Victor!" another officer yelled, just arriving. "What the hell are you doing? Go take a walk, alright?"

The newly arrived officer apologized for his partner and finished the report. As expected, both kids tested positive for alcohol, though the passenger could barely blow into the breathalyzer. He was curled up in the seat, scared stiff, and complied with everything asked of him.

The two teens were taken away in a patrol car, and a tow truck hauled off their vehicle. Then the two officers got on their bikes to leave. But before they did, Oscar said to his partner:

"You got into it with Carmen again, didn't you?"

"Yeah. I think this time I'm done with her for good."

"You don't even believe that yourself."

"I'm serious. I'm sticking with Olivia, and I'm never seeing her again."

"We'll see about that. Why don't you just admit you're hooked?"

The boss didn't answer, and his partner went on:

"You're like a junkie, man. You know the drug's bad for you, but you can't quit."

Victor nodded and turned away. His partner was right.

"I can't do it, Oscar," he admitted, putting his hands over his face. "I know she's bad for me… but I can't. I'm crazy about her, man. I'd do anything she asked…"

"You should stick with Olivia and forget her."

"For sure," he nodded, glancing at the bike he was sitting on. "Olivia's like this BMW. Powerful, reliable, obedient, no surprises. Never lets you down and handles great when you want to push it. A way better bike in every way."

"Yeah."

“And Carmen… well, she’s like the Harley Chopper: a crap bike. Uncomfortable, unreliable, breaks down all the time, leaves you stranded… but you can’t stop yourself from riding it, tearing up the roads day or night. You get me?”

“Not quite. But tell me, does she know you’re also with Olivia?”

“No. If she found out, she’d skin her alive. I’m sure of it.”

“And Olivia…”

“Yeah, Olivia knows.”

“And she doesn’t care?”

“She cares. But she deals with it.”

Oscar crossed his arms and added:

“This won’t end well, Victor. Sooner or later, you’ll have to pick one.”

“I know.”

“Who’ll it be?”

“No clue,” he sighed. “I’m dreading that moment, man. But I know it’s coming.”

“And when it does, who’ll you choose?”

The boss crossed his arms too and stared at the ground for a moment.

“Probably Carmen.”

“Seriously?”

“Or neither. Sometimes I think about getting out of this city. Request a transfer, start over somewhere else. Find another girl and…”

“Times are tough for girlfriends, Victor. If I were you, I’d hold onto what you’ve got. Women are empowered now—they don’t need guys.”

“Not guys like me.”

The Orbe

The day everything changed, we'd planned to meet in the afternoon at the Paraná, an ice cream shop far from the Khan to avoid suspicion.

Honestly, I was getting tired of this "secret" romance, of being the side chick, of sharing Victor with Carmen.

That Saturday, I made up my mind to have a serious talk with him, to say something like, "Khaki, we need to talk. This can't go on like this."

I rehearsed a thousand ways to say it and chickened out a thousand times on how to approach it. The truth was, he got defensive whenever her name came up, acting like I didn't know anything. Any mention of Carmen made him uncomfortable; his demeanor shifted, he got defensive, and he'd try to change the subject.

That morning, I sent him a message he took forever to answer. It wasn't until almost noon, after I kept pushing, that he replied with a curt:

"Fine, whatever. I'll come to your place this afternoon."

Our meetups were always at my apartment now, never his. After Carmen's ambush, he didn't dare bring me there.

"No," I shot back. "My parents are in town today, and they won't leave until tonight."

"Then we'll do it another day. I guess you'll want to be with them."

"No. They're meeting friends this afternoon. I was with them all day yesterday. You can come after they leave, but before that, we can hit the Paraná if you want."

Truth is, I knew if he only came to my place, we'd do everything *but* talk about what mattered to me. I melted completely when I was with him, so meeting in public was the best bet.

He showed up almost an hour late, and honestly, it might've been better if he hadn't come at all. He was cold, in a foul mood, complaining about everything, and I didn't dare bring

up anything serious. I tried to be cheerful, friendly, smiling… but he didn't budge. In the end, after downing his drink in two gulps, he left. Left… to go find Carmen, leaving me there alone.

Victor had finished a shift that Saturday at dawn, and naturally, he wanted to see his girlfriend. They'd planned to meet at her place in the morning, but she didn't show. She wasn't answering his calls, and he had no idea where she was. He called her brother William, who said she was at home.

So, without thinking twice, he headed there, even though Carmen's mom had banned him from coming near.

When he arrived and rang the bell, her mom saw him through the window, sparking a huge fight between mother and daughter. Finally, Carmen came out and snapped:

"What the hell are you doing here? I don't need more problems with this psycho!"—meaning her mom.

"I just… you weren't answering… I didn't know if something happened to you. I—"

"Get the hell out of here!"

The boss hung his head and left, totally thrown off. That's why he was so distant with me that afternoon and why he bolted so fast—to try and fix his mistake.

While he was with me, he kept checking his phone, and apparently, he'd managed to arrange to meet Carmen at a café near her place.

"I'm sorry about this morning," he told her. She'd just gotten there and, lucky for him, was in her bipolar "green" phase, meaning she'd calmed down a bit. They kissed.

"Wanna come to my place?" Victor asked, submissive.

"No. I want to go dancing at the Orbe."

The Orbe… the trendy biker spot up on Blue Mountain, near a reservoir. A tough place to get to with all its curves, but the boss navigated them like a pro. They went there often, sometimes with Oscar and his girlfriend.

Victor, like a typical guy chasing a girl in heat, went all out on the dance floor, and she played along. They danced salsa and bachata, pressed tight against each other, moving sensually.

Then, when she was just about ready, they stepped outside to where he'd parked the bike to hook up right there, in a spot they'd used before—behind a small shed that used to be storage for the bar but wasn't anymore.

Carmen liked doing it in unconventional, uncomfortable, relatively exposed places, and he didn't mind one bit. In fact, over time, he almost preferred it—the extra adrenaline rush. Against the wall with her legs up while he held her, or sitting on the bike, were some of their favorite spots. Once, they even did it while the bike was moving—the Harley made it easier—and nearly crashed.

The problem was, when they went outside, she suddenly flipped from her "green" phase to "red" and resisted. That pissed off the boss, who wasn't about to take no for an answer at that point.

Still, he tried to charm her gently, pulling out all his top-tier seduction moves, but Carmen wasn't having it. Not yet.

"You still mad about this morning?"

"Maybe," she said, her face serious.

Whatever the reason, Victor still had to pay a bit more.

But he didn't see it that way. He hadn't done anything wrong—she was the one who stood him up after they'd made plans, after he'd been on duty for days without seeing her.

Plus, she'd gotten him worked up enough with all the dancing, and he wasn't leaving without getting something.

So he grabbed her hard, pinned her against the wall, and started unbuttoning her pants.

“You won't dare …”

“Oh, really? And if I do? Will you report me to the Inquisition?”

“I don’t need those prudes and dykes to defend me,” she snapped, her eyes blazing with defiance. “I can handle myself.”

That threw him off a bit, and he eased up, kissing her neck but still working on her pants. She shouted:

“Let me go!”

He stopped and stepped back. They stared at each other for a few seconds, and without a word, the boss got on his bike, put on his helmet, and tossed hers away.

“Where are you going? You’re leaving me here?” she asked, her face shifting.

He didn’t answer. With a thunderous roar, he started the bike and took off… to do with me what he couldn’t do with her.

The Reservoir

It was a quick, fleeting, almost frenzied encounter. He made love to me with force, no tenderness, no feeling—like animals.

And just as fast as he came, he left… and went back to Carmen. After all, she had no way to leave unless another biker gave her a ride…

And that's what she was trying to do. When Victor got back, he found her kissing another biker while the guy groped her breasts. To top it off, she saw him coming but, instead of pulling away, hugged the guy tighter and kissed him harder.

That enraged Victor so much that in two strides, he was on them, yanking the guy off her and beating him mercilessly.

The other guy was tough too and tried to fight back, but he was no match for the boss's 220 pounds of pure muscle, especially in a blind fury. It was only because a few guys barely managed to pull them apart that he didn't kill him on the spot.

The guy was so battered he could hardly stand, and some wanted to hold Victor until the cops arrived.

Carmen realized how serious it was. If that happened, they'd open a case against him, and he could lose his job. So she stepped up, saying he wasn't to blame—that the other guy was assaulting her, and Victor had saved her.

Abuse against women was a huge deal, and just the victim's word, without proof, could land a man in prison for years.

"You want us to call anyway, miss?" the bartender asked, eyeing the guy still on the ground. "We can turn this pig over."

"No," she said. "I just want to get out of here. Let's go, Khaki."

They kissed and walked out hand in hand. They reached the spot where he'd parked the bike—the same place they'd been hours earlier. Then she said:

"Take me to your place?"

But this time, he refused. He was still pissed about her careless attitude, which had pushed him to such an extreme reaction.

"If you want to do it, it's here," he pointed to where they'd tried earlier, "or at the water tank before the crossroads."

"No. Your place."

That threw him off. He could get not wanting to do it there after what happened, but the tank area was one of her favorites, and the night was perfect for at least ending well. Plus, it wasn't the first time she'd rejected him at the last second, like earlier, and he'd had enough rejections for one day. He wasn't about to take another, and he knew he'd strangle her with his bare hands if it happened again.

They got on the bike, and in less than a minute, they covered a stretch that usually takes five.

"Khaki! Slow down!" she shouted a couple of times as he took curves practically scraping the ground.

They reached the turnoff to one of the reservoir's water tanks, a secluded spot lit up by the full moon. Victor stopped the bike, took off his helmet, and she did the same. But Carmen wouldn't get off.

"I told you, your place. Why are you stopping here?"

"Here or nothing," he insisted, grabbing her hand to pull her off. But she yanked free and doubled down:

"Your place."

There was nothing more to say. He knew her well—she wouldn't budge.

So there were only two options: force her or get back on and leave. Deep down, he didn't even want to do anything with her anymore. All he felt was rage.

Without a word, they got on the bike and started down the tight mountain curves at breakneck speed.

"Khaki! Slow down! You're gonna kill us!"

But he kept going, taking curves almost flat against the ground.

"Khaki, you're gonna kill us!" Carmen clung to him as the Harley roared, sparks flying when metal scraped the ground.

"Khakiiii!"

Victor didn't take the turn toward the city. He kept going straight toward the reservoir, not even sure where he was headed.

It started raining, making everything worse. The speed, the wet road, the low visibility, a sharp curve—who knows. The Harley gave out, and they were thrown off, tumbling down an embankment, bones breaking as they rolled until Carmen landed in the water and a thick tree trunk stopped Victor's fall.

The Judge

It was almost noon when the judge arrived at the hospital. There, he met the police officer who'd responded to the accident.

"He's one of us, Your Honor."

"You know him?"

"No, but he's in Traffic. Had yesterday off."

They both looked at Victor, lying in bed, eyes vacant and filled with tears.

"He's got multiple broken ribs, a dislocated shoulder, and a broken arm. Bruises all over, of course. A doctor just confirmed the severe pain he's in comes from a broken rib piercing his pleura. Hurts every time he breathes."

"I see," the judge said.

"They were lucky a driver coming the other way saw them slide and fall down the slope. Otherwise, they'd still be there. It's a low-traffic area, especially on a rainy day like today."

"Yeah. How'd she die?"

"Forensic says she drowned. The fall probably knocked her out, but she might've come to in the water. Problem was, her helmet filled up, and she couldn't get it off. Understandable with a broken arm and another badly injured."

"Right," the judge nodded. "They were coming from the Orbe, yeah?"

"Yes. A colleague checked and confirmed it."

"What was their relationship?"

"Seems they were dating. They were together that afternoon, dancing. Then he left for a couple of hours, came back, and found her with another guy. A fight broke out and…"

"The other guy was after her too?"

"According to the bar owner, she said the guy was assaulting her. But some witnesses aren't so sure. We don't know what really happened. Point is, they left, and, well, ended up in the reservoir. When we got there, he was holding her in his lap, crying like a child."

"He pulled her out of the water?"

"Yeah. The full moon gave some visibility. Despite the pain, he managed to swim to her, pull her out, and try to revive her. But it was too late."

"I don't get how someone in his condition could do that."

"He's a strong guy," the officer said. "Still, it was when he picked her up that the rib pierced his pleura. If that'd happened earlier, he wouldn't have been able to move."

The judge sighed and looked at Victor again, who was now visibly whimpering, broken physically and mentally.

"Alright," he concluded. "I don't think there's much more to say. I'll file the report and write it up. Officer, send me yours, and let's wrap this up."

The Military Hospital

The military hospital was over 200 miles from our city. For security, all state security forces were sent there to avoid criminals taking advantage of their vulnerability.

As expected, visits were heavily restricted. Only Maria, Victor's mom, had somewhat free access, but the distance made daily visits impossible. She tried to get time off work to stay with him, but it was denied for reasons I'll explain later.

Truth is, Victor was in bad shape. Emotionally wrecked from losing Carmen, the pain when he breathed was so intense they hooked him up to a morphine pump to cope. He needed constant help even for basic things like going to the bathroom or washing up—any movement shredded his lungs.

His boss pulled strings to get me a special permit, letting me practically live with him in that hospital room for the two-plus months he was there. Maria took over on weekends, giving me a chance to go home and freshen up.

Honestly, his mom and I became really close. She told me she'd been a religion teacher at the school where she still worked, but when the new government took power and banned public practice of Catholicism, she lost her job. Being a woman saved her from being fired outright—she started as a cleaner and later moved to an administrative role. But her current bosses never forgave her past ties to an "ideology" that clashed with the new "dogmas," and they looked for any excuse to fire her for good.

She also said she'd never approved of Victor being with Carmen. She didn't like her one bit, and she wasn't wrong. More than once, she warned him he'd never get anything good from her and that she'd make him miserable. Two people with such strong personalities couldn't possibly get along. Like magnets, opposites attract, but like poles repel.

But Victor, a natural rebel and thrill-seeker, ignored his mom's advice, as kids often do.

After all that time, his broken bones healed, and the infections cleared up. They discharged him and sent home with a three-month recovery period before he could return to work. I moved in with him since he still needed help with a lot.

Eventually, he physically recovered, but the guilt wouldn't let him live. His girlfriend died because of him, only because of him, he kept saying, and he couldn't bear it.

That's when my parents told me about Medjugorje. Some neighbors had taken their daughter there on a pilgrimage, and her life changed completely. She'd suffered from severe depression, anorexia, bulimia, and multiple suicide attempts, but after the trip, she "miraculously" recovered, started living normally, lost her negative thoughts and social aversion, and even fell in love with a boy.

Medjugorje is a small town in Bosnia, in the Balkans, where the Virgin Mary supposedly appears to visionaries. It started in 1981 when "the Gospa," as they call her in Croatian, appeared to a group of young people (Ivan, Ivanka, Jakov, Marija, Mirjana, and Vicka). The apparitions continued, even though those kids were now elderly.

Bosnia hadn't yet been fully gripped by the anti-Catholic hatred, and pilgrimages were still allowed. "We should go before they ban them," my mom said.

Medjugorje

Victor didn't want to go to Medjugorje. He had no faith. Completely detached from religion and in a state of total apathy, he spent his days on the couch, staring at the TV without really watching.

But I insisted—a lot. I couldn't stand seeing him like that. He finally agreed, mostly to not upset me after everything I'd done for him.

Traveling to Bosnia wasn't easy. It required multiple airport layovers and a long road trip, making the journey almost longer than the stay itself. Plus, there were no flights on dates that worked for my parents' schedules, so we had to squeeze the trip into just a few days.

That wasn't the only issue. The day before we were set to leave, we learned there was a strike by air traffic controllers at our departure airport, and the airline for our second flight canceled it out of nowhere. Despite all our calls, they offered no solutions.

Everything seemed to be falling apart, and I prayed to God for a miracle—that we'd be able to go, and that the trip would help Victor heal.

Finally, after a lot of stress and effort, we found an alternative flight. But it cut our trip to just two days, including arrival and departure, leaving us only an afternoon and a morning in Medjugorje.

The strike got resolved, but our flight was delayed so much we nearly missed our connection.

In the end, it all worked out. We had a layover in Amsterdam, then flew to Zagreb, and five hours later, we arrived at our destination: a small village on the Bosnia-Croatia border called Medjugorje.

We got there in the afternoon, checked into the hotel, and went to a restaurant for a simple dinner. Then we climbed the "Apparition Hill" at sunset to pray a rosary with the other pilgrims.

It was incredible to see the Bosnian valley from up there, especially as the sun set. The silence was profound, and the distant lights added to the serene atmosphere.

While we prayed, Victor sat on the ground, leaning against the fence around the Virgin's statue, and fell asleep. For someone without faith, the monotonous rosary was the perfect lullaby.

But that wasn't my case, for sure.

The next day, Victor and I visited the famous St. James Parish. My parents had gone early that morning and were already back. The church's size was striking for a village parish, with its two imposing towers standing out against the lack of tall buildings. Its white walls contrasted with the earthy ground and green vegetation.

With so many pilgrims, confessions were held outside, along one side of the church by the plaza. A bunch of priests were there, hearing confessions in different languages. There were several lines, each with a priest for a specific language. Oddly, ours had one of the shortest lines, despite being a widely spoken language.

Truth be told, I was a bit frustrated. We only had a few hours before starting the trip back, and Victor was still the same: apathetic, down, distracted… absent.

I got in line to confess, which, as I said, was one of the shorter ones. Victor watched curiously and asked:

“What are all these people doing?”

“They’re confessing, Khaki. Can’t you see?”

“Confessing what?”

“Their sins, obviously. Didn’t your mom talk about this when you were a kid?”

His answers sometimes threw me off. I wasn’t sure if the accident had left him a bit amnesic or if his rebellion against his mom, a religion teacher, had been so strong that he’d rejected everything she taught him.

“You’re confessing too?” he asked.

“Yeah, that’s why I’m in line.”

“For what?”

“Among other things, for sleeping with you without being married.”

“That’s a sin?” Another baffling question.

“Yeah, obviously,” I said casually.

Victor thought for a moment, watching the people kneeling before the priests. Then he asked:

“So, that’s enough to get into heaven? That easy?”

“No, it’s not that easy. Confession doesn’t mean anything if you don’t intend to change. You must at least try not to do it again.”

“And you’ve got that intend?”

“No.”

Just then, the person in front of me finished, made the sign of the cross, and walked away. It was my turn. I stepped forward, knelt by the priest, and started the sacrament.

It didn’t take long—five or ten minutes, and I was done. And then…

Then the miracle that changed our lives happened.

That April 15, to my surprise, Victor approached the priest and knelt down, tears streaming down his face.

“Father, I don’t know what I’m doing here. I was just with Olivia, and… now I’m here with you. I don’t know what happened. I had this… weird feeling, like a voice telling me something… I don’t remember. Or maybe I do? I’m… I’m confused…”

“Believe me, that’s happened to a lot of people here,” the priest said, an older man with a white beard and a kind face. “Who’d you come with?”

“My girlfriend. The girl who was with you before me.”

“Well, since you’re here, tell me what’s weighing on you. I hope I can help.”

Victor looked down, shuddered, sobbed, and said:

“Father, I killed my girlfriend. I killed her. Not on purpose, but I killed her.”

The priest looked at him, surprised, then at me. I was still nearby, though too far to hear, but just as shocked as he was.

“Your girlfriend, you say? But isn’t that her?” He nodded toward me.

“Yes, she’s the one, but I had another I killed. I used both of them, depending on my mood. Well, I don’t know if I used them, or they used me. Especially the other one…”

The priest sighed, debating whether to ask for more details or give a moral lecture. Instead, he just said:

“Let it out, son.”

Victor, in tears, recounted everything that had happened over the past year, focusing heavily on the day of the accident. The priest listened intently, nodding occasionally and squeezing his hands in support. After a while, the priest chose not to say much more and simply concluded:

“Son, Jesus Christ is merciful, and through me, His humble servant, He forgives all your sins. Go in peace.” He gave him a hug, which Victor returned warmly, still crying.

At that moment, Victor recalled his mom’s catechism lessons. He remembered that after confession, the priest usually gave a penance—prayers or a charitable act. He wanted a tough one to make up for all the harm he’d caused.

“What’s the penance, Father?”

“There’s no penance,” the priest said, looking him in the eyes. “The pain you’re suffering, and have suffered, is more than enough. I’ll just offer you one piece of advice: marry your girlfriend—the one who’s still with you,” he smiled, glancing at me, “and build a Christian family. It’s the best way to get through this life and secure the next.”

Part Two – The Revenge of Women

One day they came for the Jews and took them all away. I said: I'm not Jewish; why should I care?

Another day they came for the unionists, and I said: I'm not part of any union; why should I care?

Another day they came for the Catholics, and I said: I'm not Catholic; why should I care?

Then they came for the communists, and I said: I'm not a communist; why should I care?

But, when they came for me, there was no one left to defend me.

Martin Niemöller (1892-1984). Prisoner in the Dachau concentration camp.

25 Years Later

I got pregnant shortly after we got married and used that time to finally try to finish my law degree once and for all.

So, I managed to graduate on my third attempt, but I never practiced law, as I chose to dedicate myself to a much more fulfilling and rewarding task: raising and loving my children.

Yes, we had three children. The eldest, Tony, was 23 and an engineer. A man just like his father. Well, physically alike, because in personality he was more like me. Except for his blond hair like mine, they were very similar otherwise. You could say that if Victor had the face of Tom Cruise, Tony had the face of Robert Redford—equally handsome.

Then there was Vicky, the middle child, who had just turned 17. And finally, I had Angie, who was only ten years old at the time.

Vicky was a bit like Tony, but in reverse. She looked like me physically, except for her dark hair, which was like Victor's. Likewise, she had her father's rebellious personality and even wanted to be a soldier. In fact, her incorporation into the Army was planned for the following year and she always wears his hair short, shaved and in a military style.

Oh well, genetics.

Only Angie could be said to be a mix of both of us, at least physically. Because, despite being just a child, she had an odd personality. Very childish in some ways, but very mature in others. She never stopped surprising us.

And now that they were grown, I decided to return to practicing law, in an attempt to bring justice to such an unjust world.

Because the women who ruled the country had banned love. They had banned making love and had condemned men and women to loneliness, and with it, to bitterness and unhappiness.

When I was young, back when I was Victor's girlfriend, there were already more than worrying signs of all this. But we never remotely suspected that things would reach the extreme they had.

Because now, men are a minority, in decline, and in danger of extinction.

The Rally

It was Saturday, March 8th, the national holiday and International Women's Day. The city's football stadium, which was barely used for that sport anymore, had been the site of celebrations that had taken place throughout the day.

Musical performances, speeches by prominent feminist leaders, reenactments of historical events that marked milestones in the fight for women's liberation… a whole festival that culminated, at night, with the much-anticipated speech by the Women's Party candidate and current president of the government, Elle Ellis.

With just a few weeks left until the elections, the polls didn't show clear results for the ruling party. An effort was needed to convince the undecided, and it was rumored that the president was going to make a bold move that afternoon by announcing a groundbreaking measure to tip the scales.

When it was announced that she was about to take the stage, the crowd, almost exclusively women, erupted in applause and cheers, and her most ardent supporters pushed forward to try to get as close as possible to their great and beloved leader, the great icon of feminism.

Finally, amid cheers, the candidate appeared from behind some screens and approached the podium. She was a tall, thin woman with her hair shaved on the sides and a sort of "mohawk" on top, usually dyed blue. On this occasion, she had also added a matching blue extension.

She wore loose black pants made of a lightweight fabric and a modern blouse with cutouts at the shoulders. No makeup, no earrings, no adornments of any kind. She had no feminine features to identify her, and without knowing her, one might even wonder whether she was a man or a woman. That is, until she spoke, of course, and then it was clear which gender she belonged to.

She was an energetic, determined, and very courageous woman. Her gaze was sharp and biting, and she had a tremendous power of persuasion, managing to rally the masses behind even her most outlandish proposals. She earned their unwavering and unconditional loyalty, and they admired her fanatically.

After picking up the tablet on the podium, she moved a few steps toward the audience, cleared her throat, and began the rally.

"Comrades!" she began. "It was in the late 19th century when the feminist movement took shape. First came the suffragists, who began demanding something as basic as the right to vote. Then came the workers, who demanded the right to work to earn a living without having to depend on their husbands. Later, those same workers demanded something as fair as equal pay for equal work and no discrimination in hiring just for being a woman. With all that, we broke free from the yoke of men and became independent, no longer subject to any male."

"But there was still much to do, and there still is. Once those basic rights were achieved, feminists demanded harsher penalties for sexual crimes, and harassment and sexual abuse were classified as crimes of similar severity. Street compliments were banned, prostitution was banned, pornography was banned, and all forms of objectification of women were prohibited. Then we ensured that women no longer had to endure the torturous process of a trial to prove their victimhood in sexual crimes, so they wouldn't have to relive the distressing moments they went through in such situations. We ensured that our word was

believed without further humiliating investigations, even through a written statement, to avoid being subjected to insidious questioning. We have been winning right after right!”

The crowd erupted in shouts of approval, which were silenced by the speaker.

“And all this was achieved thanks to the struggle of thousands of women who risked their lives to secure those rights. A struggle that has led to the culmination of a free society like the one we have now, where we have finally achieved parity and an undeniable presence in leadership positions in all organizations.

“And yet… there is still much to be done. The presence of men among us poses a real challenge that constantly threatens to undo all those achievements, all those advances in rights and freedoms.”

Applause and cheers.

“The male scourge is still present in society, and the heteropatriarchy refuses to fully disappear. Not to mention the large number of women who are still under its yoke and

continue to collaborate in sustaining a chauvinist society, despite decades of reeducation and the immense resources invested in spreading feminist ideas.”

“For example, I see some among you who are still steeped in the disastrous feminine beauty standards that men have imposed on us for centuries. Why does a woman have to dress and look ‘sexy’ to be considered beautiful? Why should a woman with small breasts feel self-conscious?”

Again, shouts of joy, which the speaker struggled to silence. Some women began to confront others nearby for wearing tight clothing, heels, or low-cut tops.

“Enough!” she shouted. “No more heels! No more of those uncomfortable inventions designed by men to accentuate our breasts! Enough!”

Another uproar broke out, but the candidate continued her speech to try to calm it.

“Comrades!” she exclaimed. “We are already the majority! Women are beating men by a landslide!”

More cheers followed.

“We were already surpassing them in quality, but now we’re defeating them in quantity too! Considering the men who have left and those who are no longer born, we are increasingly free from the chauvinist yoke! There are fewer and fewer of them!”

More shouts of joy and applause.

“Because, according to statistics, women who choose to have daughters now are turning *en masse* to selective artificial insemination. And with that, we achieve two noble goals: first, ensuring we don’t give birth to unwanted males, and second, achieving pregnancy through a sterile, humane, and highly effective method. Just as humanity ‘humanized’ itself by stopping eating raw meat, and recently by stopping eating meat altogether, why should we continue having daughters through the barbaric and savage act of male penetration? Why should we continue acting like wild beasts that still eat raw meat and rape their females? Artificial insemination—better yet, let’s call it civic insemination—achieves the same results—no, better results—through a civilized, sterile, hygienic method that, above all, does not violate a woman’s sexual integrity, as it does not rape her in an animalistic way.”

Applause.

“Don’t let yourself be penetrated! That miserable, painful act, which only satisfies men and can transmit countless diseases to the woman, can be humanized in a clinic with personalized medical care, and of course, attended by women who understand the specific sensitivities of each one of us.”

Again, shouts of approval, which the speaker allowed to spread. When they subsided, she continued:

“‘We give birth, we decide.’ That was the cry of liberation from our grandmothers, to decide what to do with their bodies without considering men’s opinions. Our mothers also decided whether to have children or not with the same freedom, and now we can decide to say goodbye to primitivism for good by eradicating any male remnants from our societies. It’s time to welcome the new humanity. We don’t want to give birth to more males!”

More shouts of joy.

“Comrades!” she shouted, raising her fist. “Feminism must complete the final stage of its development and adopt this measure. If we don’t do it now, we will regret it!”

Applause and exclamations of approval.

“And in the meantime? What? Some of you ask. We are civilized people, and we believe in freedom, even the freedom of men. But it must be a relative freedom!”

More cheers.

“Males are like animals, subject to primal instincts they cannot control or suppress. Just as we neuter our pets, why not do the same with our sons, freeing them from that yoke? The removal of testicles in a boy is a very simple procedure that brings multiple benefits. Without needing to deprive him of his urinary organ, it will prevent him later from being enslaved by an animal instinct that would dominate him, and he will be free to fully integrate into a plural society where no one will fear or accuse him of anything, becoming a full-fledged member.”

Applause.

“If a man undergoes an orchiectomy, which is what this simple procedure is called, he will never have erections or sexual desires, and the women of tomorrow will be free from a very real threat.

“Yes, I know it’s a widespread practice, and you’re doing it more and more often. But as always, as feminism has always said… there is still much to be done!

“Yes, comrades! There is still much to be done!”

Cheers and applause.

“And since we fundamentally believe in freedom, I don’t want to propose a law that forces women to perform this civic act with their sons, though I do want to promote and encourage it at all levels. Neuter the males still running loose!”

More shouts of approval, which the speaker calmed.

“Some comrades tell me there are some good men. Undoubtedly. I’m the first to admit it. But they are so few… Deep down, they all carry the rapist gene. It’s inherent to their masculinity. Only homosexuals and the neutered can be called civilized people in the strictest sense of the word. The rest are wild beasts enslaved by their passions and primal instincts.”

The exclamations of joy repeated and spread until the speaker intervened again.

“Comrades! Decades ago, consensual or voluntary prostitution, as it was called then, was eliminated. It’s been decades since such a humiliating and degrading act for a woman, like having to sell herself for money, was abolished. Well then, let’s take it a step further! Let’s also end consensual penetration!”

Cheers and acclamations.

“If any of you have sexual needs, why satisfy them with a man? What does the sexual act offer a woman if her genitals are not stimulated? And even if they were! What does it offer her? Only a woman can better understand another woman and give her greater pleasure. And if not, highly effective devices have already been invented to do that job. No commitments, no risks, they don’t make a mess, and they’re always available. Who needs a man?”

Murmurs of approval and applause.

“Penetration, the inherently chauvinist act, must not be consented to, not even voluntarily. It cannot be consented to, as it degrades the woman, debases her, objectifies her. Deep

down, it's the same as prostitution. A woman penetrated by her partner becomes an object by being used by a beast to satisfy his bestial impulses. She ceases to be a person by participating in such an animalistic act."

Again, shouts of approval.

"Therefore, consensual penetration is also rape!" she shouted. "It's consensual rape! And as such, it must be subject to the same punishment. The same punishment!"

More cheers and applause.

"And that's why we must insist on castration, for now voluntary. Mothers! Neuter your son if you don't want to see him suffer tomorrow, desiring something he cannot have. Neuter him, so he is freed from that animal instinct that dehumanizes him."

Applause.

"On the other hand, the manifest achievements feminism has secured in recent times would be for nothing if this government continues to allow the existence of an institution that attacks women, that is patriarchal, anti-freedom, reactionary, xenophobic, exclusionary, chauvinist, homophobic, and hates and discriminates against us in its internal operations. Of course, I'm talking about the Christian churches, specially the Catholic Church."

"If my candidacy is elected, it will be given a reasonable period to change all its internal postulates and ideology, to retract and apologize for all the historical offenses caused to so many people, and to change its attitude toward all the groups it excludes and hates."

"The Church must adapt to the times and recognize that there are other reproductive methods that do not necessarily involve penetration, and it must stop condemning voluntary pregnancy termination, which is one of the inalienable rights of women and one of the great achievements of the feminist movement."

"Otherwise, if it persists in its stubborn hatred, that institution must be dissolved, outlawed, persecuted, and its followers accused of complicity, of collaborating in such crimes, hate crimes."

"And this does not violate the religious freedom proclaimed by our Constitution. It simply prioritizes the fundamental, supreme, and inalienable rights of the human person. Ultimately, anyone can adhere to the belief they find most suitable, as long as these basic principles, which shape our coexistence, are not violated."

More applause and shouts of joy.

"Lastly, I don't want to forget our racialized comrades from the Global South. As all of you know, there are still numerous countries where human rights are systematically violated, where women are treated like furniture in a dowry."

"Civilized countries should take a stand and liberate all those women from the systematic rapes they are subjected to daily, as their belief systems use them as sex slaves. Those women are subjected to chauvinist barbarism! They live in backward countries, southern countries, the only ones that still haven't implemented feminism globally."

"Comrades!" she shouted again, raising her fist. "We cannot allow all these advances to come to nothing! We cannot allow them to dismantle all our progress! If you vote for the chauvinist party's candidate, all those gains will collapse in a single day, and we will regress decades, if not centuries, in achieving those social rights, doing a disservice to the women martyrs who came before us."

“Vote for the chauvinist candidate, and all women’s rights will be suppressed. The men behind Sara Palar will repeal the laws that cost us so much to achieve, and they will lock us back in kitchens and bedrooms to be their objects of pleasure again. We cannot allow it! We cannot allow it!”

Now, loud and prolonged applause mixed with exclamations and shouts of joy, as the candidate left the stage, waving her arm and raising her fist to her fanatical and unconditional followers.

Victor and Oscar

> *Eunuch: A castrated man. Traditionally, a man stripped of his genitals to fulfill a specific social role, like guarding a sultan's harem.*
>
> *Castrati: An Italian opera singer castrated just before puberty. This ensured that boys who showed exceptional singing talent could retain a high-pitched voice into adulthood, capable of performing roles typically reserved for female voices. This combined the high-pitched childlike voice with the qualities of an adult performer that a child could hardly match: greater lung power and full vocal control.*

Oscar had been stationed in another city for a while, and they hugged as soon as they saw each other.

"So, how's things in Salinas?" Victor asked.

"Pretty much the same as here."

"Same how?"

"All the higher-ups, from sergeant on up, are women. The ones coming out of the academy are either eunuchs or young women. Guys like us? We're a minority now, with zero chance of moving up."

"Yeah, sounds about right," Victor nodded. "Same everywhere. What a country!"

"Yup."

"Did you catch Elle's speech yesterday?"

"Yeah, I saw it."

"Terrifying, right? That chick's totally lost it. She's completely unhinged."

"Well, it's part of her game. She's just playing the role she's supposed to."

As always, Oscar was the level-headed one. Always calm and realistic, he tried to downplay a situation everyone was talking about.

"You think she's not serious?"

"Look, when she says stuff like 'let's castrate the males still running loose,' she's just trying to scare people, Victor. It's like that ban on consensual sex. Sure, she *could* do it."

"She already has."

"Yeah, but who's gonna barge into your house to catch you in the act, huh?"

"Nah, you're right. They'd need a complaint first."

"Exactly. In practice, it's just hot air. Once something's illegal, the real danger isn't doing it—it's whether the person you're with stays cool. It's just another twist on false accusations. You gotta be careful who you hook up with, or they might turn on you for revenge. That's it."

"Man, 'that's it,' but that's already a lot. Between watching your back like that and women not wanting anything to do with guys anymore, you get cases like my son Tony. He's a

good kid, 23, and I bet he's only dated, like, two or three girls his whole life, tops. At his age, I was—well, you know!"

"Yeah, times have changed, man. It's a new era."

"No kidding. Pretty soon men will be extinct, or they'll stick us in a zoo. Nobody's having kids anymore. Just daughters or eunuchs."

"That's how it is, buddy. Speaking of buddies, how's your partner? You're with a woman, right?"

"Yeah, Angela. Fresh out of the academy. I think she's a dyke."

"Born that way, or converted?"

"Converted, probably," he said with a dismissive gesture. "Man, it's nuts how many there are now. The ones born that way, fine, no fault of theirs, and I respect that. But the ones who switch because of the culture? That's insane."

"Don't let anyone hear you say that, man. They'll say everyone's got the right to choose their orientation."

"Nah, I don't care what they do—rub up against an octopus if they want. But don't blame me for their frustrations, man. It's always us guys getting blamed for everything."

"Yup. It's all the 'patriarchal society's' fault, you know. Or whatever's left of it."

"Exactly. That's why they're brainwashing women en masse, making them hate 'males' and pushing lesbianism, even for those who aren't into it."

Oscar nodded, and Victor went on:

"Man, even my daughter might be one."

"For real? She's gone lesbian?"

"That's what Olivia thinks. I don't even dare ask," he said, repeating the dismissive gesture. "Goddamn, my own daughter… my own daughter's bought into all that crap about men being rapists!"

Oscar put a hand on Victor's shoulder in a gesture of support. Victor pulled himself together and continued:

"So, how about you? Didn't you say they paired you with a *castrati*?"

"Yeah. He's a good kid. Doesn't like being called that, though. Not his fault his mom had him castrated when he was little. Better to call them 'eunuchs.' It's more polite."

"Yeah, or 'males freed from their harmful gonads,' as they're officially called. Gross!"

Oscar nodded in agreement and asked:

"So, how's it going with… Angela, right?"

"Yeah," Victor confirmed. "It's fine, I guess. We're just professional. I don't think she'd save my life like you have so many times, but it is what it is."

"If it weren't for these new 'partners,' we wouldn't even be able to keep working, you know."

"True. The other day, a car ran a red light, and we went after it. I got there first, as usual, and it was a woman."

"Let me guess—she threatened to report you for harassment… or sexual assault, right?"

"Exactly. She said, 'Officer 125689,' reading my badge, 'you're risking your career. If I were you, I wouldn't push this. You know one phone call from me could ruin your life, right?'"

"She said that?"

"Word for word. The bitch didn't say anything incriminating, though—she knows we record everything. Could've been about supposed harassment."

"What a piece of work!"

"Good thing Angela showed up quick and saved my ass. She called her every name in the book, from slut to a whole list of sexist insults. If I'd said even one of those, the whole Inquisition would've come down on me."

"Man," Oscar grimaced, "it's unreal that a cop's word is worth less than a criminal's…"

"If the one speaking is an uncastrated man, it's always worth less. You know that."

"I know, man, I know. But needing a woman or a eunuch to back us up? That's messed up!"

"No kidding."

"What did we do to deserve this, Oscar?"

"We didn't do anything, Victor. Maybe our grandfathers did, but I'm not so sure anymore. It doesn't make sense that today's women make us pay for the sins of yesterday's men. That's not justice—it's just another injustice."

"You said it. The innocent pays for the guilty, as always. Our grandfathers are dead, and so are the women they supposedly wronged."

Elle and Farse

“What guy’s gonna vote for you after saying that, Elle?”

The president and her vice president were in the candidate’s office, analyzing reactions to the rally. Their team had done a detailed breakdown of the audience, social media comments, and the impact on the public and the opposition party.

“Are there even any left? I mean, uncastrated ones.”

“We should ban uncastrated men from voting.”

“Yeah, that’d be nice. But we’ve still got a long way to go.”

“There’s always more to do!”

“One day we’ll get there, no doubt. But for now, feminism has to keep pushing to secure women’s rights, which men always have been, are, and will be, an obstacle to.”

“An obstacle and a nuisance,” the vice president agreed.

“It’s them or us, Farse. Always has been.”

“I know. But now, no guy’s gonna vote for us.”

“I know. But I’m sure most women will. We’re already two out of every three voters, after the mass male emigration over the last decade. Ever since we women kicked all those animals to the curb.”

The vice president smiled, and her boss continued:

“And the alternative is the far-right, Farse. The macho party. So…”

“Victory’s in the bag.”

“Yup.”

“It was a genius move to strip male emigrants of their citizenship and…”

“And grant it to every woman who came here, right away.”

The two women fell silent for a moment, reviewing data and comparing charts from before and after the rally, while strategizing for the upcoming debate with the opposition candidate.

“Do you think we should announce the plan to punish porn consumers with the same penalties as rapists? They’re collaborators, Elle. Complicit in the worst kind of machismo.”

“That filth was banned ages ago. Is there even anything left?”

“Not on the internet, no way. AI’s scour the web day and night, wiping out content and snitching on server owners. Nobody dares upload anything anymore—they’d rot in jail for life.”

“So what’s the issue?”

“People printed photos and recorded videos, Elle. Physical stuff’s still out there.”

“Alright, we’ll pass the law. But we won’t announce it until after the election.”

“Why? If we say it now, we’ll get more votes.”

“Yeah, but it could be taken the wrong way.”

The vice president thought for a moment and said:

“I see where you’re going. The gays, right?”

“Exactly. Our allies, the gays, might get uncomfortable. We haven’t banned their prostitution or gay porn because their votes are too valuable. Same with mandatory castration—it’d hurt them.”

“Not just that, Elle. If we pushed that, a ton of straight guys would pretend to be gay to avoid castration.”

“Exactly. That’s why we can’t make it mandatory. Our allies would turn into rivals. It’s a minefield.”

“Fair enough. I’ll talk to the women pushing to ban all that and explain it.”

“People are complaining? Why? What’s the problem?”

“Well, gay porn is still porn, even if there are no women in it…”

“Look, Farse, men are like animals. We should treat it like a wildlife documentary.”

“Haha,” she laughed. “Yeah, I like that angle.”

“Exactly! Spread the word! Let’s encourage straight guys to screw each other too. If they’re so desperate to penetrate, let them penetrate each other. That’s not a crime.”

They both burst out laughing and moved back to the charts.

“Have the OC girls said anything?”

“Sorry?”

“The Oversight Committee.”

“Oh, right, didn’t hear you. Well, the Inquisition…”

“Farse,” she cut in, “I hate that term. We shortened it to OC for a reason—it should be the ‘Oversight Committee and Early Warning Against Machismo.’ I don’t want to hear that word again, at least not around me. Got it?”

“Got it,” she said, looking down. “Won’t happen again.”

“Alright, what were you saying?”

“They’re not happy about the church decree.”

“Why not?”

“It could cost us some women’s votes.”

“Oh, I see.”

“Plus, those people barely cause trouble anymore. There are only a few Christians left. Let them be—they’ll die out on their own.”

“Yeah, that was my plan. But it’s not gonna happen.”

“Why not?”

“Our gay allies asked for it. They’ve got a deep hatred for priests and want them to pay for all the harm they’ve done historically.”

“Got it,” she nodded. “Well, let’s hope we don’t lose too many votes.”

“I doubt it. There can’t be many women who still go to church *and* vote for us. Most of them are chauvinists and vote for our rivals.”

“For sure,” she agreed, glancing at her tablet to move on. “So, about the debate—how’re you gonna handle it?”

“Not too worried, Farse.”

“Why not?”

“These days, people follow everything on social media. And as you know, it’s all polarized. People only see what they’re interested in, never what they hate. In that debate, influencers won’t show what Sara Palar says—they’ll show what *I* say.”

“Be careful, Elle. Your rival’s a sharp, capable woman.”

“So what? Whatever she says, even if she’s right and I’m not, our supporters will never highlight our weaknesses in their media. They’ll skip the parts where I lose and replay the parts where I win, over and over.”

“Yeah, that’s true. But some people will watch the whole debate and draw their own conclusions.”

The chief smiled, looking at her vice president with a mix of arrogance and paternalism, then said:

“Farse, have you read *The Psychology of Crowds* by Gustave Le Bon?”

“I don’t read books written by men.”

“And you’re right not to. But there’s a version by a woman, Keltse Müller, that I recommend. Still, I read the original back in the day.”

“What’s it say?”

“It was written in the late 19th century, but it’s got timeless truths. Le Bon says that in a ‘crowd,’ people lose their sense of responsibility and critical thinking, making them more open to suggestion and emotional contagion. Crowds react to suggestion and emotion, so ideas and feelings spread fast, and people mimic each other without thinking.”

“I get it, and I think I see where you’re going.”

“Exactly. Crowds are impulsive, emotional, and easy to manipulate. They don’t think logically—they respond to images, symbols, and simple slogans. Reasoning doesn’t work on them; catchphrases do. Crowds follow strong, charismatic leaders who appeal to emotions over reason, driven by fear.”

“That’s why you’re not worried about what Sara Palar might say, right?”

“Exactly. Even if she’s got all the logic and lays it out brilliantly, nobody will listen. Only direct, visceral attacks get through to crowds. That’s what they understand, what they notice, what they care about, and…”

“And you’re a master at that, Elle.”

First Day at the Workshop

It was his first day at the workshop. He'd just finished his degree in mechanical engineering, and the owner hired him, partly for his expertise in motorcycles, which he knew inside and out. No wonder—his dad and he had spent their whole lives tweaking engines to make them faster for the racetrack.

"Hey, I'm Ivan."

"Tony."

They shook hands. The guy assigned to show him the ropes looked about his age, though he'd probably only done vocational technical training.

"First time in a workshop?" Ivan asked.

"Yeah. I'm a mechanical engineer," Tony sighed. "No way to get a job in my field. Women get first dibs, you know."

"Yup, I hear ya. Anything office-related, they've got locked down. Damn subsidies..."

"At least here they keep things equal, right?" Tony glanced around.

"Don't kid yourself, Tony. All these women you see? They don't do jack."

"What do you mean, they don't do anything?"

"Zip. Nada."

They both looked at a group of women of various ages, mostly of Islamic background, milling around the workshop. Ivan continued:

“It’s tough finding women who wanna come to a place like this and get their hands greasy.”

“There’s gotta be some…”

“Yeah, a few. But they’re so rare, shops fight over ‘em. Gotta throw big bucks to even get them to consider it.”

“You’re saying they get paid more to come here?”

“Yup.”

“But, technically, women and men are supposed to get the same pay for the same work…”

“Yeah, that’s what the Constitution says, but you know, it’s just words on paper. Like you said, women get priority. Gotta meet the parity quota, or the boss gets the shop shut down.”

“Got it. So, if you pay them enough, they might be okay with getting greasy, but…”

“Even then, they don’t wanna come. They’ve got cushier jobs that pay about the same. And you can’t pay ‘em a fortune either—it’s not like the business is rolling in cash,” Ivan said with a resigned shrug. “These Arab women get paid the same as us, but they’re cheaper for the boss. She gets tax breaks for hiring women from ‘macho’ countries.”

“There are subsidies for hiring Arab women?”

“Yup. It’s the government’s ‘global solidarity’ thing. Solidarity we all pay for—you and me—with our taxes. Not the government, of course.”

Tony glanced at the women again. Some were wearing coveralls, but most were in their usual street clothes.

“They really don’t do anything?”

“Some might grab a tool or try to learn something… But honestly, the boss is just happy if they stay out of our way. That’s what they do—they hang out and let us work.”

Sure enough, most of them were gathered in a circle, chatting away.

“At least you can look at these ones without getting reported,” Ivan added. “Not that there’s much to look at—covered head to toe, man.”

“What about her?” Tony nodded toward an older woman sitting in a chair, holding a string of prayer beads, seemingly praying.

“That’s Irnma. Started yesterday. She’s your parity,” Ivan chuckled. “They brought her in a day early, just in case you didn’t show up today and the Inquisition came down on them for missing parity by a single day.”

“For one day?”

“Yup. They’re trigger-happy with that stuff. But when it’s the other way around, they look the other way. Man, what a country.”

“Yeah, something like that happened to my grandpa. He was an IT guy and reported his company for not being equal—three out of four employees were women.”

“What happened?”

“Take a guess. The nicest thing they called him was a sexist fascist. Said he was against women’s visibility, that he just wanted them cleaning or in the kitchen, the usual crap.”

“What about the complaint?”

“Thrown out. They ended up firing him for a ‘hate crime’ and hired another woman. He was already old, so he had to retire—couldn’t get hired anywhere. And that was years ago, so now…”

“Well, at least women still don’t wanna work in workshops. Let’s hope that lasts.”

“Why’s she sitting alone?” Tony asked, nodding toward the woman who’d started with him.

“She doesn’t talk to the others.”

“Why not?”

“They don’t understand each other. She doesn’t speak Arabic—she’s from… Persia, or some place like that. Somewhere weird, also Muslim, but in the middle of nowhere. Doesn’t know a word of our language. Just communicates with gestures… almost like a caveman, man. But you know what?” Ivan continued. “She’s practically the hardest worker here.”

“No way.”

“Yup. Yesterday, she spent the whole day cleaning the workshop—left it sparkling. This morning, she’s been sweeping and cleaning the windows. They’re so clean you’d think they’re not even there. You should’ve seen the grease streaks they had.”

“But she’s technically hired as a mechanic, right?”

“She wouldn’t know a screw from a nail.”

“Right, but she could report the boss for making her do lower-level work, like cleaning.”

“She does it ‘cause she wants to. Plus, she’s not reporting anyone, trust me. She’s getting paid the same as you, an engineer, and it’s close to her place. What more could she want?”

“Yeah, sounds like a sweet deal for her. And she doesn’t even work that hard, right?”

“Well, it’s probably her prayer time now. You know they pray five times a day. But the boss wants her to clean the men’s bathroom next. She’s gonna have to put some elbow grease into that one!”

The Debate

“Good evening. First, we welcome the two candidates. Ms. Elle Ellis, representing the Women’s Party, to my right, and on the other hand, Ms. Sara Palar, the candidate of the Freedom Party, to my left.”

The moderator stood at a podium in the center of the stage. The podium was made of acrylic with a tray holding two electronic tablets and a mobile phone. She was a woman in her forties, dressed appropriately in dark pants, a shirt, and a blazer with shoulder pads. She wore no adornments except for the earpiece in her right ear, through which she received instructions from the production team.

After greeting both candidates with a slight nod, the moderator continued.

“I also want to thank the audience present here, as well as all the people following us live through the various platforms broadcasting this debate.”

The woman cleared her throat and added:

“The structure of this event will be as follows. First, a brief speech, no longer than five minutes, in which each candidate will outline their main plans or government proposals for the next four years. Then the debate proper will begin, and I kindly ask for the utmost respect for each opponent. Finally, one or two minutes for conclusions and final remarks.

“Without taking any more spotlight myself, I yield the floor to the candidates. By a coin toss, it has been decided that Ms. Palar will speak first.” She gestured to the woman on her left.

“Thank you, Madam Moderator.”

The Freedom Party candidate was a woman in her fifties, with dark hair worn long, dressed in an elegant black dress and high heels that accentuated her figure.

Her podium was identical to the moderator’s, except it held only one tablet and a mobile phone. Her face was composed, showing some wrinkles that makeup had tried to conceal.

“Ladies and gentlemen of the audience, dear viewers and listeners. I want to begin this speech by first addressing the process that has brought us here. It might seem that this perverse, hysterical society built on hatred has always existed, but that’s not the case.”

“It all began in the late 20th century, so cherished by my opponent’s party, when the Social Party lost its reason for being. Indeed, once the middle class was established and the ‘oppressed’ were no longer oppressed, they had to find new victims of oppression—or if none were found, they had to invent or exaggerate wherever they were.”

“And the sad thing is, they arrived too late, because all Western countries’ constitutions, the highest legal standard that governs us, already fully equated the rights of both sexes and prohibited discrimination based on race, gender, or sexual orientation.”

“Even so, the Social Party searched high and low for any reason to claim discrimination to justify their existence, and that’s how they first found racial minorities and then homosexuals, the quintessential historically marginalized group.”

“It didn’t take them long to win them over, granting them all sorts of benefits in the form of social rights, subsidies, and stipends of all kinds. With that, they easily bought their votes, with everyone’s money, of course.”

“But that wasn’t enough, because in a prosperous society, without ‘oppressed proletarians,’ you can’t secure landslide electoral Victories with minorities alone. Indeed, the bigger prize was women, because if they could also win them over, they could significantly tip the scales.”

“If, in the case of racial minorities, the enemy to defeat was the white man, in the case of women, the enemy was men. Men had to be portrayed as evil, oppressive, perverse, crude, and dirty, so the Social Party could come to save women from a catastrophe… that the same party had created.”

“They fabricated an enemy, which is what it was all about, and they did it slowly. The demonization of men took shape gradually, in a subtle but very effective way. With the invaluable help of the media, always in favor of that party, in movies and series, the protagonist increasingly became female, even in action films. Men were always ‘the bad guy,’ and if they weren’t, they were relegated to a secondary role as a clumsy, foolish person. Of course, if a man lived with his wife, he always abused her, and the poor woman suffered terribly for the chauvinist society to believe her. Over time, romantic movies became lesbian or, at the very least, about deep friendships between two or more women. They never fought over partners, with the third party invariably being a man who, with his dirty intentions, tried to break the idyllic ‘female harmony.’”

“So, the Social Party soon transformed into the Women’s Party, and with that name change alone, they gained a significant number of votes. But since a government doesn’t survive on image alone, they had to take action to further secure their voters’ loyalty, and then… then the real marginalization of men began.”

“Lies!” shouted the other candidate from the other side of the room. “You’re distorting the facts!”

“Candidate, please,” the moderator intervened. “It’s not your turn to speak.”

“The marginalization of men began, and it’s plain to see.”

“Lies!” she repeated.

“They started using the tired tactic of fear, that is, scaring women with the help of their friendly media, making us believe that isolated and exceptional incidents like domestic violence or rapes happen massively and daily. Of course, any of those crimes, even if few, are deplorable, but it’s striking that news broadcasts open with them and completely ignore, to the point of seeming nonexistent, far more numerous and frequent crimes like assaults, murders, gang fights, violent robberies, workplace accidents, or suicides. Could it be because their victims are primarily men? These facts are not only barely mentioned but also receive no political concern whatsoever.”

“In short, I think it’s great that you want to reduce the number of women murdered by their partners or the number of rapes to zero, and that the news keeps a tally of those crimes since the start of the year. But why don’t they do the same or dedicate the same resources to fighting for those other, much more numerous victims? Could it be because those victims aren’t politically useful? Because they don’t vote for you?”

“And the truth is, that strategy has worked for you, and it’s obvious. Because, logically, if you promise more rights to women in a society that already has equal rights, those ‘extra’ rights can only come from undermining the rights of the other side, that is, men’s rights.”

“They handed out subsidies left and right, prioritized women in all public sector hiring processes, and even forced private companies to hire women in all sectors, even those where

women traditionally had no interest in working. Of course, the same subsidies weren't given to men, who began to swell the unemployment lists en masse. 'Why bother spending money on them if they don't vote for us?' you said."

"You're twisting reality!" Elle interjected.

"Candidate, please, it's not your turn to speak," the moderator repeated.

"Everything I'm saying is the truth, Ms. Ellis. Besides, you'll have time to rebut me, if you can, when it's your turn. If you'll allow me to continue, please," she looked at the moderator.

"Go ahead."

"Thank you. Well, as I was saying, the Social Party's core motivation was confrontation; class struggle: the Manichean division of the world into good and bad, rich and poor, proletarians and capitalists, and now, men and women, always pitted against each other. Women, therefore, must hate men and distance themselves from what men are, that is, from masculine behavior, and exalt their femininity."

"However, and contradictorily, that's not the case. Women reject their own femininity and abhor it, as is the case with motherhood. It could be said that there's nothing more feminine than motherhood, and yet, paradoxically, it's what today's women, especially the most feminist of feminists, abhor the most, and all they want is to do what men do."

"Because what men do is better!" Elle shouted. "That's why! Enough discrimination!"

"Candidate!" the moderator shouted as well. "I don't want to have to call you out again!"

Silence fell over the room, and after a moment, Sara Palar continued.

"It's the great contradiction of today's women: how to reject masculinity, which they hate, without falling into femininity, which they also hate. It's sitting on the fence, in a world of contradictions, very typical of the Social Party, which only generates dissatisfaction. They reject biology, trying to build a cold, masculine environment, precisely in beings who are, by nature, affectionate and sentimental."

Elle began rhythmically banging on her podium in protest. But her rival remained unfazed.

"But the Social Party is very skilled at blaming others for its own mistakes. If things go wrong, it's always someone else's fault. If women are depressed or dissatisfied with their lives, it will never be the fault of those who have deprived them of loving men or motherhood. The blame will always be on men, and therefore, far from needing less feminism, what's needed is even more feminism, another twist in an already out-of-control and desperate situation. And the tool is hatred. Hatred is cultivated, typical of the Social Party, and it's stoked and fueled as a tool for liberation."

"The foundational nature of the Social Party was based on confrontation, in the purest Marxist style of class struggle. Thus, confrontation and revolution regained their former strength, and millions of women were convinced they were oppressed, even though they no longer were. And since they couldn't take revenge on those who had theoretically oppressed them in the past, they hated those who, paradoxically, had done the most for their 'liberation,' that is, the men of the present."

"Feminism ceased to be feminism the moment the Social Party took hold of it, as it injected its falsely egalitarian class ideology to radicalize it, turning it into supremacism. There's no mercy for the defeated: all must be exterminated."

“Ms. Palar, please wrap up.”

“Yes, Moderator. To conclude,” she looked at the camera, “I want you to know that I firmly believe in feminism.”

“Lies!”

“Yes, Ms. Ellis. I firmly believe in equal rights and opportunities for men and women, in the sense advocated by classical feminists. But since the Social Party, now called the ‘Women’s Party,’ appropriated it and turned it into an ideology, it perverted it and transformed it into the supremacism we all suffer from today, in this society of hatred.”

“Not all of us!” she shouted.

“Your turn, Ms. Ellis. Now you may speak.”

“Thank you, Madam Moderator.”

The candidate tapped a few icons on her tablet while receiving instructions through her own earpiece. Elle had chosen to dress almost like a man this time, in the most casual way. In addition to her shaved sides and signature blue “mohawk,” she wore a simple cotton T-shirt with a design of the feminist symbol of hands joined by the index finger and thumb. When she tilted her head, a wrinkle seemed to form on her neck, though it could have been a shadow cast by the spotlights. Few knew her age, and it was hard to guess just by looking at her. Some claimed she was around 30, while others said she was well over 50.

“First, the chauvinist party candidate is using the mirror tactic, which basically consists of accusing others of the flaws she herself has. She is the pot calling the kettle black. For example, if she hates women just for being women, she claims that’s my attitude, and thus unloads her problem—and in this case, her hatred—onto me.

“But I’m not here to defend myself; I’m here to attack and refute, one by one, all her lies, all the falsehoods she just uttered. So, after that speech full of lies, fallacies, and inaccuracies, I could say many things, and I will. But I want to start with the most basic. Do you know what our nation is called? Huh? Could you tell me the name my party, the Women’s Party, agreed on to describe our land?”

“You think that by calling something a certain way, it becomes that thing, but it’s just another deception. A deception like the many—”

“Stop lying! Answer and tell us once and for all what our nation is called, please.”

The candidate fell silent.

“Very well. I’ll tell you! It’s called Democratic, Egalitarian, and Gender-Balanced Republic! Want me to repeat it? Because it seems you don’t know. Democratic, Egalitarian, and Gender-Balanced Republic!”

Sara Palar nodded, with anger.

“We’ve changed our country’s name to reflect a fact, an intention, a reality that all the women of this nation believe in and want to develop and fight for, to live in a feminist and free place, free from chauvinist oppression.

“When you spew those slanders from your filthy mouth, you do nothing but tarnish the effort, the courage, the relentless struggle of the women who came before us and gave their lives to defend a just ideal, an ideal of justice that often led them to death, to be beaten by the intransigent, the reactionary, the intolerant, by the males who exercised the despicable gender violence that today, thankfully, has significantly decreased. But even so, comrades,”

she looked at the camera, “even so, that scourge still persists, and as we always say, there’s still much to be done! There’s still much to be done!”

The room erupted in applause.

“Don’t start another rally, please,” the rival candidate retorted. “We already know all your slogans very well. We’re here to debate.”

“Fine, let’s debate. Let’s debate the lies you told in your previous speech. For example, you said feminism invented gender violence to gain votes. Are you seriously saying that all the women killed by gender violence are exaggerated or invented? Are you trying to tell me those women died in vain? That all violent males should walk free? Is that what you’re trying to say, Ms. Palar?”

“I’m only saying that—”

“Are you trying to tell me women aren’t discriminated against in their jobs just for being women? They don’t earn less than their male counterparts despite doing the same work? They don’t face daily insults, humiliations, the lustful gazes of males who desire them in a filthy way? They aren’t systematically raped by men who only think about satisfying their base animal instincts?”

“Ms. Ellis, all that happened in the past. You’re stuck in the 20th century.”

“Of course it’s in the past! Absolutely! But that’s thanks to us, the feminists, who reversed all those unjust situations. Thanks to us, there’s no longer discrimination for being a woman, and we all earn the same as men for the same work. Thanks to us, males can’t look at us the way they used to, because we’ve imposed fines so heavy they’ll think twice before casting their filthy gazes on certain parts of our anatomy. All that is thanks to us, Ms. Palar! Thanks to us! Women listening to us,” she looked at the camera, “vote for this chauvinist woman, and you’ll suffer all those injustices again. Vote for this woman… well, she’s not really a woman. She’s a man in disguise!”

“Candidate, please…” the moderator interjected, but she ignored her.

“The far-right candidate is a woman, yes. But she’s a woman who thinks like a man! A man in disguise!”

Murmurs of approval and applause broke out in the studio, emboldening Elle.

“Sara Palar… Sara! What a patriarchal name! She was Abraham’s wife, the male patriarch by nature! What can we expect from a woman subjugated to a man? More subjugation! Can’t you see how she dresses? Who are you trying to provoke with that cleavage, Ms. Palar? Me?”

The audience burst into laughter.

“Yes, don’t laugh,” she continued. “This may seem like a bit of a joke, but this woman lives with a man who owns companies where women are discriminated against, where they’re not allowed in, preferring men for positions women can perform. That’s the candidate you have before you!”

“That’s not true! My partner’s companies are strictly gender-balanced! As the law mandates!”

“You live with a man, Ms. Palar! Aren’t you ashamed?”

Elle went straight for a visceral attack, without mincing words. The rival candidate restrained herself, though she looked at her with eyes cold as ice.

“Do you have sexual intercourse with him? Huh? Does he penetrate you?”

She couldn’t hold back anymore:

“Ms. Ellis, I’ll say this once: stop meddling in our bedrooms! Do you hear me? Stop invading our privacy!”

Elle let out a laugh, and the other continued:

“I find it very curious that you ask if I’m ashamed to live with a man. You know what? My great-grandmother, who lived in the 19th century, would’ve asked me the same question. You’re more puritanical and less ‘liberated’ than the priests you so despise. And also retrograde and reactionary, against progress.”

“What is this lunatic saying?” she looked at the audience.

“Yes, Ms. Ellis! Retrograde and reactionary! You ignore the sexual revolution that took place in the 20th century, which freed us so long ago from something you want to impose on us again: chastity.”

Elle smirked maliciously and said:

“Women voters watching us,” she looked at the camera again, “here’s clear proof of what I said earlier. This person is using the mirror tactic!” she shouted. “She accuses me and my party of what she and hers truly are! Retrograde and reactionary! Ha! Have you noticed how she’s twisted logic to pin on me what best defines them? But don’t be fooled!” she continued. “If you vote for this candidate, the hetero-patriarchal society we’ve worked so hard to overcome will persist. Consensual penetration, rape, gender violence—everything will be decriminalized! All our progress will be for nothing! Men will do whatever they want again, locking us in kitchens and bedrooms, and we’ll be their sex slaves again. That’s what will happen! Have no doubt about it! Let’s reclaim chastity! Yes! But male chastity! Not ours!”

Applause and cheers from the audience.

“Ms. Ellis, you’re exaggerating, as always,” she tried not to fall for the provocation. “No one’s going to lock you anywhere. Stop spreading fear!”

“No! You are a very real threat! Fear is what all women feel! Fear that you’ll come to power! You say I’m exaggerating… I’m not exaggerating at all! Men are irrational beings subject to animal instincts that dominate them and they can’t control. That’s a fact!”

“They can’t be that irrational if humanity has advanced so far to get here.”

“It’s advanced technologically, and that progress came at the cost of our grandmothers’ sacrifice, who submitted to them sexually to appease their desires. Otherwise, they wouldn’t have gotten anywhere. But that stage of humanity, perhaps necessary, is over. The barbarism has ended, and now the new humanity begins.”

“Do you plan to kill all men so they’re not tempted to rape us?”

“We’re not beasts, Ms. Palar, like they are. We only want to guarantee every woman’s right not to be raped. And since they can’t live without raping, we believe the best solution is…”

“Mandatory castration, right? That’s what you want?”

“I’ve already said we’re not barbarians. But we must promote orchiectomy, that is, the removal of those harmful glands that enslave them—their testicles—and make them have bestial desires, so they’re not tempted to do harm. Men who undergo this prophylactic act

will be rewarded for their willingness to serve the community and their commitment to feminism. Honestly, I think it's the only way to end this scourge that has caused so much suffering to women throughout history."

"But tell me. What if a woman wants to be penetrated by her husband or partner? What if it's habitual?"

"She needs reeducation. Consensual penetration is like voluntary prostitution. It cannot be consented to, as it degrades the woman, debases her, objectifies her. It's the same thing! A woman no longer needs that to have children! She can do it through artificial insemination! A cleaner, safer, and far less humiliating method."

"Yes, of course," the rival candidate smiled sarcastically.

"Don't laugh, Ms. Palar! Don't mock the feelings of women who are still raped daily by their husbands! Because a woman penetrated by her partner becomes an object used by a beast to satisfy his bestial impulses. She ceases to be a person by participating in such an animalistic act. And therefore, just as we eliminated the scourge of consensual prostitution, we must now eliminate that savage, barbaric, humiliating, degrading, and above all, chauvinist act that is penetration, even consensual penetration. Enough!" she shouted. "Enough of you profaning our bodies!" she looked at the camera. "Enough!"

"Ms. Ellis, you're repeating yourself. You said that four years ago, and when you won the elections, you made it law. Consensual penetration is already illegal."

"Yes, but I'll never tire of repeating it! According to statistics, seven percent of women still live with unneutered males. Including you. And I can't believe all those men remain chaste, including the male you live with. In short, we need more reports! We need more reports to end that scourge! To finally stop the systematic rapes those poor women are subjected to daily! Consensual penetration is nothing but consensual rape, and as such, we must pursue and punish the rapists."

"Do you see?" she looked at the camera. "This woman is insane. That such a law exists is proof and a sign of her madness. And what can we expect from a woman like that? Much worse things, of course, and soon they'll turn against us. This person is hatred personified, and the next step will be imprisoning men who live with a woman or castrating them directly, because no one will report someone they love."

"What kind of love is that, Ms. Palar? What kind of love is that? If they loved them, they wouldn't penetrate them!"

Murmurs of approval in the room emboldened Elle.

"What does that barbaric, animalistic act offer a woman? It's the ultimate chauvinist act! There's no act more chauvinist than that! And it offers nothing to the woman! We're no longer in our grandmothers' times when they had no choice but to go through that horrible ordeal to have children. Nowadays, anyone can make an appointment at a clinic and get pregnant without paying such a bothersome toll. We've often been criticized for restricting women's freedom. They said the same about prostitution. But what freedom? It's just ignorance, slavery, emotional immaturity, self-flagellation, that kind of masochism imposed educationally by males since the dawn of time. In short, submission to the male's will, remnants of the hetero-patriarchal society we must eradicate once and for all."

"What nonsense!" the rival candidate put her hands to her head.

“Women of the world! Don’t let yourselves be penetrated! Don’t submit to the male! Don’t allow them to use you! Don’t consent to them raping you! Report them all!”

“I can’t believe what I’m hearing,” the rival managed to say. “You’re completely insane!”

“Insane, huh? Did you hear that?” she looked at the camera. “That’s what the collaborationist women and their males said when the first feminists demanded their rights! They called us insane!”

Cheers and murmurs of approval.

“Yes! We’re going insane! Going insane for achieving equal rights! Going insane for breaking the will of the men who enslave us! Going insane for ending those who only see us as sexual objects! Yes, going insane!”

“Ms. Ellis, you’re still living in a world that no longer exists. You’re stuck in the early 20th century.”

“You’re the one stuck in that century!” she interrupted. “We’re only progressing toward a fairer, freer, more egalitarian society!”

“Is it justice to promote daughters reporting their fathers just for making love to their mothers? Is that progress? That’s a communist dictatorship! Do you know that in Soviet Union times, such practices were encouraged?”

“Yes, of course, and you represent the Freedom Party, right? But freedom for what? I’ll tell you,” she looked at the camera. “The chauvinist party wants to give freedom to males to beat and rape us systematically. To repress and electroshock gays, to force lesbians to be penetrated by men, to lock us all in kitchens or bedrooms—in short, to take away the freedom we’ve worked so hard to gain! They want their freedom, not ours!”

“No, ma’am. We only want men and women to be free to choose what they want, without any coercion. Free in an environment of equality!”

“Candidates,” the moderator intervened. “In fact, this part was meant for Ms. Ellis to give her introductory speech. However, I see—and I’m glad—that you’ve moved straight to the debate. But now it officially begins, though you’ve already used up part of your time. Ms. Palar, you start.”

“Thank you, Madam Moderator,” she cleared her throat and continued. “So far, everything we’ve discussed revolves around the so-called gender ideology. However, I’d like to talk a bit about other issues that greatly concern society. Not everything is about chauvinism, rapes, and so on…”

“Do those issues seem minor to you?”

“I think we also need to address other topics and not always talk about the same thing. Setting aside the identity discourse, which seems to be all that matters to you, we also need to discuss other serious issues. For example, what’s your economic plan? Is your entire program ideological? I say this because this policy of excluding men from everything is causing us serious harm. Yes, Ms. Ellis. Don’t shake your head. We’re sidelining a significant part of our society, and that limits our progress in advancing economically and overcoming the stagnation we’re in. We’ve had decades of flat growth with intermittent recessions, and we need to boost our economy. And for that, we need to include all members of our society. It makes no sense to ignore the talent of so many men who could contribute a lot but are being sidelined because of gender ideology. For example, in the field of robotics, there’s a

pending definitive development of engineering applications combining this discipline with artificial intelligence to compete industrially with our rivals.”

“Ms. Palar, are you suggesting women aren’t up to the task as engineers or computer scientists?”

“No, I’m not saying that. I’m just pointing out that there’s a lot of talent being overlooked, wasted, and that should be considered.”

“Do you see?” she looked at the camera. “She thinks women don’t know science! What more do you need to hear? What more do you need to realize the deep misogyny of this person? And I say person so as not to call her a man outright, which is what she really is, at least internally.”

“Here we go again with the identity issue. We always come back to the same thing! Not a single economic proposal, just ideological slogans repeated over and over.”

“That’s because you represent a very real danger to all women.”

“Ms. Ellis, the real danger is you, leading a dictatorship. But it’s not a feminist dictatorship as many call it. And it’s not for the simple reason that the Social Party, now called the ‘Women’s Party,’ has abandoned feminist principles to become something else.”

“What is this lunatic saying? That we’re not feminists?”

“No, Ms. Ellis. You’re not!”

“Are you, then?”

The audience laughed.

“I was saying that the Social Party…”

“The Women’s Party!” Elle shouted. “Call us by our name!”

“No, Ms. Ellis! I refuse to do so! When you stop calling us the ‘chauvinist party’ and call us the ‘Freedom Party,’ I’ll stop doing the same.”

A brief silence followed, after which the opposition candidate continued.

“I was saying, for the third time, that your party has abandoned feminism…”

“No!”

“It has renounced feminism because the only thing feminism has ever sought is equal rights and opportunities between men and women, without having to take into account a person's gender in obtaining a job, a promotion, or holding public office. And those are principles I share absolutely! But Ms. Ellis's party defends something else. It defends considering gender before granting those positions... To always give them to women. That's not feminism, Ms. Ellis. It's not feminism! It's reverse machismo!

The audience murmured, and even a timid applause was heard, which was quickly silenced.

"Equality has been achieved a long time ago," Ms. Palar continued. "Since the Constitution..."

"No! There's still a lot to do! There are still many professions in which women are in a clear minority! And that can't be!"

"Isn't it simply because women don't want to do those jobs? Are you trying to force them to do them if they don't want to?"

"Have you heard it?" She looked at the camera. "If you listen to the speeches of the macho, heteropatriarchal leaders of the past, they said exactly the same thing. Exactly the same thing! What do you want? For only men to work and for us to stay at home, cooking and having babies like rabbits through penetration? Is that what you intend? Is that what you're going to do when you come to power, if you ever get there? With that approach, you come here to ask for women's votes?"

"No. I only ask, I demand! that men and women have equal rights and opportunities. Nothing more! And that for every job, for every managerial position, the best candidates be selected, and quotas and parity be eliminated."

"Ah! What you want is to return to patriarchy!" If gender equality were eliminated, everyone would hire men! Don't you realize that, candidate?

“No. Men would be hired if they had passed the relevant tests. Likewise, if those who passed the tests were all women, then 100% women. That's all there is to it! Evaluation based on merit without regard to gender! That's what the first feminists demanded until you came along with your gender ideology!”

“You live in a world that isn't real, Ms. Palar. Who's going to hire women if there isn't a quota? If there isn't a requirement that all jobs be 50% men and 50% women?”

“Your reasoning is curious when today all the leaders and all the middle managers in companies are women. I insist, you're still maintaining a discourse more appropriate to a century ago than to today. An extremist, identitarian discourse that seeks revenge and punishment more than integration.”

“But, what are you saying?”

“Mrs. Ellis, you propose castrating repeat offenders in cases of rape. But the prison sentence for that crime is already life imprisonment. What's the point of castration, if they're never going to get out of jail again? Is it so they can't masturbate either?”

Some laughter from the audience.

“No, ma'am. It's in case governments like yours ever want to release them. That way we can truly ensure they never do it again!”

“As I say, revenge. Pure and simple revenge, driven by the demonization of men simply for being men, and which has condemned millions of women to loneliness and frustration, because it has distanced us from them and prevented us from loving and being loved.”

“To love and be loved, you say! Of course a woman wants to love and be loved! Of course! But she doesn't want to be loved by a wild beast who only wants to penetrate us and satisfy his base animal instincts. That love doesn't interest us!”

"Mrs. Ellis, you're presenting a caricature of a man. Actually..."

“All men are like that!”

“Every one of them?

“Almost all! A woman can’t risk trusting a male. They’re experts at seducing, deceiving, promising, and lying! And all for the same thing! To penetrate women! That’s all they want and seek!”

The audience nodded and applauded. Some women cheered unabashedly.

“They’re all rapists!”

More cheers and applause.

“Trust only another woman! Seek that love and companionship in a woman! Only another woman knows how to give us what we need! We’ll never let each other down!”

“Ms. Ellis, that apology for lesbianism you’re making is absurd.”

“No! It’s not.”

“A woman who isn’t a lesbian doesn’t have to be interested in...”

“No!”

“In fact, she rejects...”

“No, no, no! You don’t know the findings of modern anthropology, Ms. Palar. Have you read the works of the eminent doctors Kramer and Larsen?”

“Yes, two lesbians who say that...”

“Do you see the misogyny of this person? Do we have to tolerate elements that hate women like that in these times? That’s a hate crime!”

“I don’t hate anyone, Ms. Ellis. I only meant to say that those works are biased by the sexual identity of their authors.”

“The authors, dear viewers, are two Nobel Prize winners who researched the sexual inclinations of men and women. They concluded that while in men it’s instinctive, animalistic, in women, sexual inclination is educational or cultural, and therefore susceptible to change and evolution toward higher spheres, as many women already know. It’s science, Ms. Palar! Pure science! We can’t let males keep using our bodies to satisfy their bestial impulses. Let’s choose sensitivity! Say no to penetration! Say no to penetration!”

“Say no to penetration!” the room chanted, as the speaker repeated it with her fist raised.

Final Remarks

“They’ve set us up.”

Sara Palar was talking with her chief advisor during a short break for commercials. The slightly younger woman shook her head in frustration.

“They promised me a neutral audience. But you see, their tentacles reach even here.”

“At least the moderator has been fair.”

“So far. I hope she doesn’t mess things up now.”

“She doesn’t seem like she will. Come on… get ready, it’s starting.”

The advisor left, and the moderator looked at the camera, beginning to speak again.

“We welcome back the viewers listening to us after this short break. It’s been a very interesting debate, heated at times, as we expected. Now it’s time for the final remarks, which should be very brief. You have one minute, preferably less. Ms. Palar, you begin.”

“Thank you, Madam Moderator.

“Dear viewers, this may be the last chance we have before Ms. Ellis and her ‘ultras’ destroy society as we know it. There may not be another opportunity, and we could end up in a dictatorship as ferocious as the one Germany suffered in the 1930s. Yes, dear voters. That German leader was also democratically elected and was responsible for the deaths of millions of human beings.

“Ladies and gentlemen voters, returning to the matter at hand, I propose expelling politicians from schools so they stop indoctrinating our children and reinstating private education for those who choose it. Parents must not be robbed of the right to educate our children as we see fit. The state has no right to claim that authority, which should belong exclusively to mothers and fathers.

“On the other hand, regarding the workplace, the ideal would be to eliminate quotas, which the Freedom Party will do if we win the elections. But if not, we only ask that the current law be enforced, that is, real parity. A parity that’s only enforced in jobs women don’t want to do, to the detriment of affected businesswomen, who are forced to hire people who only seek a paycheck without contributing anything. We demand, therefore, that parity also applies to managerial positions and offices, where in practice, only women are hired. And that the presumption of innocence be restored, so no man has the sword of Damocles hanging over his head with the threat of a rape accusation. His conviction only may occurs if evidence of his crime is found, without a woman’s word being taken as truth without further investigation. The rule of law is based on these basic rights, which, although still in force, are not applied in practice.

“Because being a feminist isn’t, as my opponent’s party preaches, giving everything to women. That’s not what we feminists sought, and I include myself among them. Classical feminists always aimed for equality between genders, without one having to be superior to the other. The government party’s feminism isn’t feminism; it’s a perversion of it.

“In essence, ladies of the audience, listeners on all platforms, I want you to take away one message: I’m only trying to bring a bit of sanity to a society ruled by madness. I want to build a free society, without prohibitions, without threats, made up of free people, without any repression. Don’t let fear guide you! We are the Freedom Party! Long live freedom! Thank you very much.”

Some timid applause, quickly silenced, gave way without pause to the speech of the current government president.

“Ms. Palar, you may have noticed I didn’t interrupt you once, despite all the nonsense you just said. Because I really wanted to, especially when you compared us to the fascists we so hate.

“Not wanting to stir more controversy, and due to the lack of time, I want you to understand one thing,” she looked at the camera, “how can we give visibility to women if we keep making the same mistakes of the past? If we eliminate quotas, we’d be doing a disservice to all those comrades who died before us defending women’s rights. Who died trying to dismantle the patriarchal society that has historically subjugated us, that has tied us to the bed to be mere objects of male pleasure!”

Cheers and acclamations.

“Because that’s what the chauvinist party represents, comrades. They only want to rule again, and for us to be their slaves once more. Vote for that party, and decades of progress will collapse. They’ll take away our right to vote as they did in the past, lock us in kitchens and bedrooms, and we’ll be their sex slaves again. Have no doubt about it! Not one step back, comrades! Not one step back!”

The audience chanted the last phrase for a while, and it was the speaker herself who had to stop the chants, which had already exceeded the allotted time.

“Comrades!” she exclaimed, with a wide grin. “In what will be my final words before the elections, I want to make a call to men.”

“No! No!” came from the audience.

“Yes, to men!” she repeated.

“Contrary to what’s said about our party, we don’t hate them, as we’re falsely accused. On the contrary, we respect and admire all those who respect and admire us, who understand us and don’t abuse us; all those who share with women the inalienable principles of feminism.”

Applause.

“That’s right, comrades! We respect and love men, and we have many male role models among our heroines. But they’re feminist men! Men who stood with us, who understood and supported us!”

Applause and cheers.

“Yes, comrades! We love and accept all those who want to join this exciting project, this drive we have to build a just and balanced society, and above all, free of rapists.”

More cheers and acclamations.

“And to conclude, I’ll quote one of them, one of those men who paved the way for our freedom, Comrade Castro—castrated—the great apostle of the Revolution. He said:

‘Backward… not even to gain momentum!’”

More cheers and acclamations amid applause.

“Forward, comrades! Always forward! There’s still much to be done! There’s still much to be done!” she proclaimed as she left the stage.

The fervent audience stood, now applauding and cheering wildly, rallying behind the candidate, with the entire studio celebrating the indomitable, tireless, indefatigable great leader of feminism, Elle Ellis.

Family lunch

“Mom, why’d you guys get married again?”

“To celebrate our 25th anniversary, sweetie.”

“But weren’t you already married?”

“Yeah, but this way we’re renewing our commitment.”

It was a simple ceremony, almost in secret. Ever since the government announced plans to crack down on the Church, most temples faced daily protests, with mobs of hooligans camped out nearby to disrupt masses, especially on Sundays. It was rare to find a temple without graffiti, much like what happened to Jewish businesses in Germany in the 1930s.

Little Angie still didn’t quite get why we were celebrating, bringing all five of us together.

It happened at the Khan, of course! It had stopped being a hangout for kids and turned into a proper, fancy restaurant.

We sat at a table where the boss's crew used to hang out back in the day, and Victor and I shared some stories from our youth that our kids hadn't heard before.

We ordered the usual tofu and soy dishes, which Vicky loved, though Victor went for the classic burger with eggs and fries, despite the crazy taxes they'd slapped on meat.

"The priest told me they should build us a monument," I said.

"Why's that?" Victor asked.

"Well, we've got three kids, we got remarried—now we just need grandkids."

"Good luck waiting for those from me," Vicky, the rebel, shot back.

"Why not, sis?" Tony teased, always poking at her. "Not even gonna have a test-tube baby?"

"It's called *inseminated*, you brute, sexist, retrograde fascist…"

"Alright, enough!" Victor cut in. "Can we have one meal in peace?"

We all went quiet for a moment, but Tony wasn't done:

"Not even an *inseminated* kid, Vicky?"

"Nope, not even that."

"Then who's gonna pay for our pensions, sis? Future's looking pretty grim."

"I think the future's grim for *men*—especially guys like you, an uncastrated animal."

"I said *enough*!" their dad snapped. "Can't you two talk without tearing into each other?"

"We can," Angie piped up, the little one who'd stayed quiet through the argument. At ten years old, she somehow felt on equal footing with her siblings.

"Alright then, tell me—who's gonna pay for our pensions? There are fewer and fewer of us, not just men, but women too."

"Immigrants," Tony replied. "Who else? At my workshop, eight women have shown up just this year, and more are coming. There's a huge pull factor—they get paid to do nothing."

"That's just your industry, son," I chimed in. "It's not like that in the judiciary or offices."

"Yeah, 'cause you're all women there. No need for 'filler' hires."

Tony was genuinely hurt by what he'd seen at his workshop. Everyone knew it happened, but living it firsthand had him pissed off. He went on:

"Still," he glanced at his sister, "we can't *all* get castrated. Someone's gotta provide the seeds for those daughters, right?"

"Yeah, but that stud's not gonna be you," Vicky fired back.

"Why not?"

"'Cause you're not a feminist."

"Oh, really?"

"Nope."

“Well, I consider myself one. I voted for the party that stands for full equality between men and women.”

“You voted for the fascist party.”

“Alright, kids, that’s enough,” I said.

“Well, things aren’t how they really are—they’re how people think they are,” Tony said. “If feminism keeps insisting women are discriminated against, even though they haven’t been for decades, that’s just another way of twisting rhetoric and hiding reality.”

My daughter shot him a murderous look, nearly throwing her drink in his face.

“You’re a sexist, a phallocratic fascist, a…”

“That’s it!” Victor roared. “Can’t we have a normal conversation without this damn topic coming up? Everyone’s always talking about the same crap. This is going nowhere.”

“Mom, what’s a stud?” Angie asked, and thank goodness for that question—it broke the tension. I tried to explain as best I could:

“Well… let’s see, how do I put this… It’s a special animal, like a bull, born from a cow that gives good milk. So they use it to get other cows pregnant, so those cows give good milk too. Got it?”

Angie looked confused.

“And is *your* milk good?”

“Mine? The best! That’s what fed you boys when you were little.”

“You mean us girls,” Vicky corrected. “You had two girls and one boy. We’re the majority.”

“Oh, come on, does it matter?”

“It *does* matter, Mom. All those microaggressions are what keep—”

“Enough!” Victor stood up. “I’m outta here. You all stay here with your microaggressions, your genders, sexist habits and your stupid, absurd feminism.”

He got up, threw his napkin on the table, and stormed off.

“No, Khaki, where are you going?”

“I’m going to watch futbol. At least there, nobody corrects anybody, no matter what they say. You coming, Tony?”

Tony got up to leave with his dad, and I was furious:

“You too, son?”

“Sorry, Mom. If he’s not here, there’s not much point to this celebration anymore.”

They left, and I shot Vicky a look that, if looks could kill, she’d have dropped dead right there.

And yet, she didn’t seem too bothered about ruining our anniversary meal. She held my gaze for a few seconds, and no one said a word. The silence broke only when Angie looked at Vicky and said:

“So, Mom, if your milk’s so good, why can’t Tony be a stud?”

The Shower

The house had two bathrooms, but one was upstairs, next to Victor's and my bedroom. So, the three siblings shared the only bathroom downstairs.

More than once, Vicky had chewed out Tony for using the same bathroom as the girls, demanding he use ours instead. Or better yet, that I switch to the downstairs one so men wouldn't "defile" their sacred female space.

But Tony, naturally, ignored her. To make matters worse, the bathroom didn't have a lock. Angie had gotten stuck in there a couple of times, freaking out, so Victor removed the locks from all the doors.

One day, Tony was in the shower. Vicky needed to use the bathroom and, hearing no noise, thought he was done. But he wasn't. She walked in and came face-to-face with her naked brother, his anatomy—the thing she hated most—in its most intimidating form.

"You disgusting, sexist, fascist! You're a crude part of the phallic culture!"

Tony covered himself with the curtain and burst out laughing.

"Wow, sis, you've got that memorized! But just so you know, I wasn't doing what you think."

"Oh, really? You were *masturbating*! You pig! Fascist! You're a filthy, gross, savage male… You scare me! You're disgusting! Pig!"

Tony kept laughing.

"I wasn't… Look, it's super common, especially in the shower with hot water… it just happens…"

Vicky covered her ears.

"I don't want to hear your gross nonsense! Get out, you damn pig! The upstairs bathroom's occupied, and I need to use this one!"

She handed him a towel, looking away—she didn't want to see that sight again. Tony dried off a bit, wrapped the towel around his waist, while Vicky waited patiently, facing away.

“I wasn’t doing what you think, but it’d be totally normal. You know there aren’t any women available. Are we not even allowed to do *that*?”

“You should get castrated, like decent people do. Then you wouldn’t have those savage, animalistic urges.”

“*Decent*, you say? Even the Catholic Church’s sexual repression, which you hate so much, didn’t go that far. You’re worse than the most prudish medieval priests and nuns. But when it comes to *you* girls doing the same ‘dirty’ stuff, there’s no limit, right?”

“You can’t compare the two.”

“Oh, can’t I?”

She turned to face him, though she didn’t dare look down, “just in case.”

“No. It’s not the same! Ours is tenderness, sensitivity, affection…”

“I can do that with a woman too.”

“No! You guys only want one thing! To dump your filthy garbage into the female womb, which doesn’t need that savagery to get pregnant anymore. It doesn’t *need* it!”

“Yeah, I know, it’s better to have a metal tube shoved up there with some other guy’s sperm who had to jerk off first. You’re the one grossing *me* out, sis,” he snapped, no longer laughing.

“Here’s your bathroom, enjoy it,” he said as he left. “Oh, but it smells like *man*… so scary…” he muttered through gritted teeth, leaning close to her face as he walked out.

Ivan

Tony's workshop buddy, Ivan, had a deep hatred for women. All men did, naturally—when a society breeds hate, hate is what you get.

"No wonder there are rapists. Honestly, too few, if you ask me… They've cut us off from sex, so we've gotta do *something*."

Tony stayed quiet.

"What we need to do is fight to change this," said Frank, another coworker. "We need to go back to how things were, convince women we're not that bad."

"That's impossible. It's only gonna get worse. All us 'normal' guys need to rebel before they lock us up and castrate us all."

"The *castrati* are running the show now," Frank went on. "They won't let their masters go back to being 'violated.'"

"There are still real men in the police and the military. Your dad, for example," he said to Tony.

"Yeah, but they've got no power," Tony replied. "Not only are promotions off the table, but they can't even improve their work situation. Like, at his age, my dad should be in an office by now."

"Forget that. Offices are off-limits to men. It's all women there."

"You're the son of divorced parents, right?" Tony asked, looking at Ivan.

"Yeah. Why?"

"I heard those kids are usually the most feminist."

"Yeah, I know where you're going," Ivan said with a sarcastic grin. "And yeah, I was like that. Grew up with just my mom, and she fed me all that crap about men being bad. Overprotected me… you know the deal. Then I grew up and my eyes opened. I started realizing things weren't like she'd told me."

"Go on, spill," said Frank. Ivan looked down, his face turning serious.

"They split when I was little, and as always, they fought over custody. They hated each other, obviously, but in those cases, the woman always wins. My mom's lawyer told her she could win fast by claiming abuse, and that's what she did. They threw my dad in the RAV, and he never saw me again."

"The RAV?"

"Yeah, you know, the Registry of Abusers and Rapists."

"Oh, right. We just call it the R-A-V."

"He lost everything, Frank. Me, who he loved most, and any chance of getting hired anywhere."

"For real?" Tony asked. "I thought the RAV was only checked for employee contracts."

"Nope. Even clients hiring a professional take a risk if the guy's on that list."

"Damn, so what'd your dad do?"

“What do you think? He had to move in with my grandparents—they kept him afloat with their pension. He was lucky it was twenty years ago. If it happened now, the RAV would be the least of his worries.”

“Now he’d go straight to jail.”

“Yup.”

“Your mom never told you any of this?”

“Wait, ‘cause the horror movie’s not over yet.”

He paused, then continued:

“He almost killed himself, but my grandma saved him. My mom always told me he was an evil, selfish guy who only cared about himself and hated me. With that story and no way to hear his side, what was I supposed to think? I found out the truth later, through my grandparents, when it all went down.”

“What happened?”

“Over time, he met another woman, one who was single.”

“The loneliness this damn society forces on women,” Frank cut in.

“They started dating, and it seemed promising. Until he wanted to make love, naturally, but she was already brainwashed by the feminazis and reported him.”

“Damn, but she was an old-school woman…”

“I don’t know what happened, Tony. My grandpa said the next day she changed her mind. Felt ‘raped.’ With all the brutal mass indoctrination, all the nonsense they spew about penetration, it’s almost understandable.”

“What happened to your dad?”

Ivan’s face twisted with deep hate, and after a sigh, he added:

“He killed himself in jail.”

Silence fell, everyone feeling the weight of it.

“Well, you can’t generalize. Not all women are like that. My mom, for example…” Tony started.

“Your mom’s an exception. This stuff happens ‘cause women have too much power.”

“Makes sense,” Frank agreed. “When someone’s got a powerful weapon, it’s hard not to use it—or at least threaten to.”

“But the issue isn’t women having too much power. It’s us having none.”

“It’s gotten out of hand,” Tony said. “I think a lot of ‘sensible’ women backed this at first to fix a real problem. But they never thought it’d spiral into *this*.”

“It’s like Germany in the 1930s,” Frank pointed out. “They gave power to you-know-who because of a crisis, and ended up wiping out Jews and starting a world war.”

“Yeah, but no allies are coming to save us, ‘cause the whole world’s like this. The only revolution’s gotta come from inside,” Ivan insisted.

“Good luck with that. No woman’s giving up the privileges they’ve got now. The feminazis are awful, but they’re not dumb. They’ve bought every woman’s vote.”

“That’s why my solution’s force. We gotta rebel against the system and do what it hates most.”

Victory

“You heard, right?”

“Yeah, it just came up on the news.”

Tony had to drive his dad to the station because he couldn’t ride his motorcycle. He’d injured his hand wrestling with a criminal. They gave him two weeks of medical leave, but he needed to swing by work to sign the paperwork. There, they ran into Oscar, and they were talking about the latest news.

“Damn, absolute majority. How the hell did this happen?” Victor said.

“What, you expected something else?”

“Well, yeah. That woman, Sara Palar, seemed so level-headed…”

“It’s been decades of brainwashing—movies, talk shows, curated news, influencers… They’ve flooded social media with their garbage.”

“No kidding.”

“And all to trash straight relationships, especially the average guy. They always paint us as savage, backward, stuck in the past. And that’s on a good day.”

“That’s true,” Tony added. “Even the street where my shop is got renamed. Used to be Shakespeare, now it’s some woman’s name… I can’t even remember who. Some mediocre writer nobody knows.”

“Exactly. But she’s a woman, so she’s automatically worth more than the best male writer.”

“They’ve been doing it bit by bit, son. Started with that inclusive language nonsense, and that’s how they slipped the poison in.”

“What do you mean?”

“Your dad means they use inclusive language when it suits them,” Oscar said. “Right?”

“Yup.”

“Like, if they’re criticizing bad behavior, it’s always in the masculine—no inclusive language there.”

“Exactly,” Victor continued. For bad stuff, inclusive language doesn’t exist. But for good stuff? They barely use the masculine anymore. All the good adjectives are feminine.”

“You know they tagged Sara Palar’s house with graffiti?” Victor said.

“Yeah, and her husband’s business too. The punk girls did a solid job. No client’s gonna buy from them now, scared of backlash.”

“Why does she hate us so much?” Tony asked.

Oscar grinned and said:

“Elle’s just jealous of the male orgasm. That’s why she hates us. She’s missing a dick!”

The three burst out laughing.

“Man, if she had one,” Victor said, “she’d be one of us. They’d have to find someone else.”

“For sure.” They laughed again.

“Yeah, that’s why she’s so after traditional couples,” Victor said. “Rumor is, she’s coming for us directly now. She’s got the census of uncastrated guys living with partners—all she needs is an order giving us a deadline to either get snipped or leave the house.”

“You think she’d go that far?” Tony asked.

“Look, fifty years ago, if someone said a leader would ban heterosexual sex, nobody would’ve believed it. This is just the next step. In a few decades, there won’t be a single man left in the West. Women only have daughters—if they even bother having kids—or boys who get castrated to keep the tax breaks.”

“Okay, Oscar,” Tony went on, “I get Elle’s resentment over not having a dick. She’s supposed to be a lesbian, right?”

“That’s what they say.”

“Alright. But what about the rest of the women?”

“Look,” Victor jumped in, “since female sexuality is less intense than male sexuality, it means in a sexual relationship, we always come out on top. And since feminists hate men, they don’t want to give us that win, that pleasure, even if it means they lose something too.”

“Ugh, don’t say that to any woman. They’ll never admit it.”

“Admit what?”

“That their sexuality’s less intense. At most, they’ll say it’s different.”

“Nah,” Oscar shook his head. “That’s a proven fact, and I’ve got proof.”

“Tell him, man. I know where you’re going.”

“It’s a fact—there’s never been male prostitution for women in history. I mean, actual prostitution.”

“Well, not exactly. Gigolos exist.”

“Barely, Tony. Maybe one for every hundred female prostitutes, if that.”

“Plus,” Victor added, “in all my years as a cop, I’ve never seen or heard of a woman raping a man.”

“Same here,” Oscar said. “That’s undeniable proof of an undeniable fact.”

“That female sexuality is less intense.”

“Yup.”

“And you think that’s why lesbianism’s on the rise? To avoid giving men satisfaction?”

“Yeah, it’s part of it. Since female sexuality’s less developed, they’ve been told men are bad, and women are super affectionate with a strong need for love—so lesbianism’s an acceptable, logical solution.”

“Yeah, makes sense. What can we expect now?”

“Now that they’ve got an absolute majority? Brace for the worst.”

Shock

We were in bed but couldn’t sleep. Elle’s Victory had us all shaken, and we couldn’t believe what was happening.

“I ran into the neighbor yesterday,” I said. “She’d just taken her son to get castrated. He’s only six. I felt so bad…”

“Don’t they do it at the hospital when they’re born now?”

“She didn’t do it then.”

“Understandable. Why now?”

“Oh,” I sighed. “To save him trouble down the road, I guess. So no one can accuse him of rape. You know it’s everywhere these days.”

“Yeah, I know. When anyone, man or woman, has a weapon like that…”

“Plus, it’ll help him climb the ladder at work, maybe even become an executive… it’s all advantages. Having something you can’t use because it’s illegal or because there’s no one to use it with… kind of pointless.”

“Yeah, but the whole setup’s absurd, Olivia. I don’t get why there’s no mass rebellion against a society that literally castrates us.”

“They did it slowly, Khaki. By the time we noticed, it was too late. They’d brainwashed and abducted everyone.”

“We let it happen… without a peep. Even the men! All under the excuse of giving women visibility, they took every leadership role, and nobody said a word to avoid being called sexist. And now that they’ve got the power…”

“No, hold on, that’s not the issue,” I clarified. “Women running everything isn’t better or worse. Before, only men ran things, and the world didn’t end.”

“Well, according to feminists, back then you were just reproductive sex slaves with no rights.”

“‘You.’ See? You fell for it too. It’s not about class consciousness, which is what they want. By saying ‘you,’ you’re lumping me in with them, when I had nothing to do with that or ‘suffered’ it.”

“Agreed.”

“And for the same reason, neither you nor today’s men should pay for what our grandfathers did or didn’t do with their wives. If that was unjust, what they’re doing to you now is too. Discriminating against men today doesn’t bring justice. It’s just two wrongs.”

“Tell that to Angela, my partner. I’ve tried explaining, but she doesn’t get it. Keeps saying, ‘Now it’s your turn.’”

“Yup, that damn class consciousness. There’s no ‘us’ or ‘you.’ We’re all humans, same class.”

“That’s what I tell her, but no dice.”

“How’s it going with her?”

“Pretty good, usually. Except when this comes up. Better to avoid it.”

“Then don’t bring it up. Those people are deaf and blind. I see it every day in court. You won’t find a single woman who doesn’t talk about ‘revenge’ and all that.”

“Goddamn, it’s not about revenge. Like you said.”

“It’s not revenge because those victims, if they even were, are long dead, and so are their supposed oppressors.”

“You don’t think they were victims?”

“Sure, women back then didn’t have some rights, and that was unfair. But they also had advantages men didn’t.”

“Like what?”

“Well, they didn’t go to war, for one. That’s huge. Back then, wars were constant. And they didn’t work themselves to death like their husbands did. Staying home with family, friends, and kids doesn’t sound like such a bad life compared to men’s. Honestly, I wouldn’t have wanted to be a man back then, with all the supposed privileges.”

“I noticed you didn’t say ‘you had.’”

“Of course, Khaki, you weren’t even born!”

“True.”

“Those were tough times for everyone. But at least nobody was mutilated, and men loved their wives.”

“Not according to feminists.”

“Yeah, as always, making the exception the rule. Sure, some guys were bad—there’s always a few. But at least husbands and wives could be together and love each other, unlike now, in this crazy society. Or rather, crazed.”

“I still think women running everything’s a big part of it.”

“No, Khaki. I don’t think that’s why. The problem’s the politicians—they pitted us against each other.”

“True. But at least they could stop being so hypocritical and admit society’s not equal. What we’ve got is machismo again—reverse machismo, maybe, but machismo all the same.”

“It was the politicians, Victor. To win a group’s vote, they made them victims artificially. They invented or exaggerated a problem and offered to fix it.”

“Well, the problem was real, wasn’t it?”

“Sure, in the 19th century. By the 21st, it was gone, and they kept hammering the same narrative.”

“Yeah, men are evil, they want us all in the kitchen, they won’t stop raping… scare tactics to get votes.”

“It worked like a charm, Khaki.”

“And the worst part is we fell for it without a fight,” he groaned. “We let them trash the presumption of innocence, let people get accused without evidence…”

“Because judges didn’t dare uphold justice.”

“Exactly. I remember as a kid, wondering why they didn’t arrest the dealer in our neighborhood—everyone knew who he was and what he did. ‘There’s gotta be evidence,’ they told me.”

“Right, because in our system of freedoms, it’s better to let a hundred guilty people walk than jail one innocent. That still holds… for women. For men, especially with sex crimes, it’s better to lock up a hundred innocents than let one guilty guy go.”

“You said it,” he sighed. “I got sent to control a feminist protest surrounding a judge’s house in a rape case. Nobody dared touch a hair on those women.”

“What happened?”

“Didn’t I tell you?”

“Don’t think so.”

“Well, the judge caved, of course. Convicted the guy despite no evidence.”

“Was he innocent?”

“Only God knows. It was his word against hers… Maybe something happened, maybe he forced her… who knows. Point is, they couldn’t prove anything, and he still got convicted. Cases like that set precedents, and…”

“And now we’re castrating our sons. From that mess, this mess.”

“Yup.”

“It makes sense. If they’ve poured so many resources into favoring one group to buy their votes, the propaganda works, and judges are human, after all.”

“It’s nonsense that the law’s enforced in every case except that one. A person’s innocent until proven guilty, right? But in those cases, it’s flipped—you’re guilty until you prove you’re innocent. And if you can’t, you’re screwed. All it takes is the victim’s word.”

“No, Khaki, you’re making the same mistake.”

“What mistake?”

“By calling her a ‘victim’ when she’s still just an ‘accuser,’ you’re already leaning toward a verdict, aren’t you?”

“True. They say ‘victim’ and ‘aggressor’ before and during the trial.”

“Yup. I see it every day in court. It’s all because of feminist pressure, Khaki. If you’re a judge or politician and refuse to pass laws that prejudge the ‘accused,’ you’re a sexist, and that’s the worst insult there is. Your career’s done.”

“Goddamn, what a disgusting society. If it weren’t for our kids, I’d get outta here.”

“No idea where we’d go. Everywhere’s the same,” I said, a bit sad.

“There are places that haven’t ‘progressed’ this far.”

“Yeah, but how long until they catch up to where we are? What’s the point of leaving if we’ll just end up in the same spot in a few years?”

“No point, for sure.”

We sat in silence for a while, mulling over everything. Sleep still wouldn’t come, and then I said:

“Well, better times will come,” I concluded. “Come here, hug me. Let’s make the most of it while we can.”

Victor looked at me and smiled.

“You want me to commit a crime?”

“Yes, please.”

Motocross Championship

It had rained, and the track was a total mud pit. Only Victor and I showed up—apparently, the girls weren't interested in watching their brother potentially become the state supercross champ. I think I was the only woman in our section, and it made the guys around us uncomfortable. But I wasn't missing my Tony compete in such a big championship. His dad got him hooked on motorcycles, though Tony always leaned toward off-road, like trials. I think that's where his love for mechanics came from, watching his team's techs tweak the bikes to go faster. He'd already won the freestyle title, and now he just needed the supercross crown. Twelve finalists lined up at the start, packed tight, the air thick with adrenaline and excitement. The roar of engines and the crowd's cheers echoed everywhere, creating an electric vibe.

The race kicked off, and the bikes shot forward, many popping wheelies, riding on just the back wheel.

From the first second, Tony took the lead, nailing jumps and corners with insane skill. His bike seemed to fly over obstacles while we held our breath with every move.

His longtime rival, Alex, wasn't far behind, eyes locked on Tony. With fierce determination, he stuck to Tony's rear wheel, waiting for the perfect moment to strike.

The tension built with every lap. The two swapped leads in a frantic dance of speed and skill. The crowd was on edge, glued to the track. Every jump, corner, and skid was a show in itself.

Twenty minutes felt like four or five. As laps passed, slower riders fell back, often getting in Tony and Alex's way, forcing them to weave around. Sometimes they'd use those riders strategically to throw each other off.

The final lap came, and Tony was in front, but Alex wasn't giving up. In the last straight, both gunned it, their bikes roaring like wild beasts. Then the unexpected happened: Alex went for a risky pass, getting dangerously close to Tony. Their bikes clipped, and in a flash, Tony lost balance and hit the ground, his bike sliding off the track.

We went silent for a moment as Victor grimaced, bummed his kid lost the race. I was on edge, scared for my son's life. It wasn't his first fall in a sport like this, but the real danger was another bike coming from behind and hitting him.

Thankfully, he got up in time. The ground was soft and wet, so the fall wasn't too bad. He stepped off the track to watch the inevitable: Alex, heart pounding, crossed the finish line first.

Luckily, the sportsmanship between the two kept things cool. They shook hands, earning a huge ovation from the crowd. Still, though Alex won, the crash with Tony left a bitter taste.

We went to console him, and Victor gave him a hug, saying:

"You did awesome, son. I'm so proud of you."

"Thanks."

"Still, I think you gunned it too hard in that last corner."

"Had to if I wanted to keep the lead."

"Well, next year you'll be champ."

"Doubt it."

“Why? You were *this* close! You were in first! And you know Alex is switching to Enduro. You won’t have any real competition!”

“No, Dad. I’m done competing… for good.”

“What?”

“You heard me. I’m out.”

“You’re quitting bikes?”

“Quitting racing. I’m sick of going up against people,” he said, and headed to the locker room.

“What’s gotten into him?” Victor asked me.

“He’ll get over it,” I said. “He’s just mad about losing.”

We headed home alone since Tony had to wrap things up with his team.

But I was wrong. He didn’t change his mind. It was hard to believe that the passion he’d had since he was a kid could end so suddenly, right at the peak of his career.

We sure didn’t see that decision coming. And he soon made another one, way more extreme. So extreme, it left us all speechless.

Invitation

It was the weirdest visit. Some random woman, dressed in the typical feminist getup—short hair, trench coat, baggy pants—rolled up to the pit lane. The receptionist greeted her as she lowered her window.

“Morning. Here to get your car checked?”

“Uh… no. I need to talk to a mechanic…”

The woman glanced toward the back of the shop. Only Ivan and Frank were there, deep in fixing a truck engine.

“One sec.”

The receptionist walked over to them, and Frank looked up first. She motioned to him, and he came over.

“That woman wants to talk to you.”

“Me specifically?” It sounded like a complaint about a bad repair.

“No idea,” she shrugged.

Frank headed to the tool table to take off his gloves and clean up with a wet wipe. Meanwhile, the receptionist went back to her spot, but the woman signaled her again and she had to turn back as Frank approached.

“Not him. The other one.”

“Ivan?” She pointed to the other guy.

“No. That one,” she pointed again. “The blond one at the back.”

“Tony?”

“Yeah. Him.”

The receptionist went back into the shop and approached Tony.

“That lady wants to talk to you,” she said, pointing toward the pit lane.

“What’s she want?”

“No clue. Maybe you fixed her car, and she’s got a complaint.”

“Don’t recognize that car,” he replied.

“Well, go see what’s up.”

Tony walked over and leaned down to see the woman. She barely looked at him, just said:

“A lady wants to meet with you,” she handed him a card. “Complete discretion.”

“A lady? Who?”

The woman didn’t answer. She kept staring straight ahead, started the car, and drove off. Tony stood there, looking back and forth between the car and the card.

“What’d she want?” Frank asked, lingering nearby.

“Not sure.”

“You know her?”

“Nope, never seen her. She told me to go to this address.”

Frank glanced at the card and said:

“That building’s in the fanciest part of the fanciest neighborhood in the city.”

“So, she’s rich.”

“Whoever lives there, yeah. Was it her?” he asked, confused. The car was average, and the woman didn’t look like she belonged in that ritzy area.

“No. She said I’m supposed to meet some ‘lady’ there.”

“Well… one of two things. Either it’s a mix-up, or… that ‘lady’ wants to hook up with you.”

The stretch tube top

I was finishing getting dressed when Vicky came into my room to use the bathroom. Since the "incident" with Tony, she avoided the downstairs one. It brought back bad memories.

"Why do you keep wearing that sexist thing, Mom? Bras are a male invention to show off our breasts. You should wear what I do—a stretch tube top."

"Honestly, it's hard to even find them anymore," I replied. "Buying bras at the usual stores is a pain."

"They should be banned."

"Seriously, Vicky, all you women today think about is banning, banning, banning. Besides, I think those tube tops don't support enough."

"Nonsense. They hold and compress just fine, keep things from bouncing around."

"Not convinced, Vicky. I've been wearing bras since I was young, and I'm used to them. Anything else feels weird."

"Lots of women your age, even older, have switched to tube tops. They flatten your breasts so it doesn't stand out, and you avoid men's stares."

"I'm not reporting anyone for looking at me."

"That's not the attitude, Mom. You gotta keep those pigs in check. Otherwise…"

"Otherwise, they'll rape us," I cut in. "Yeah, I know."

"It's the truth."

"Sure… Look, Vicky, when I was young, women walked around half-naked, and nothing happened."

"Nothing happened?"

"Nope. Sure, there were cases—always have been since forever. But not as many as now, even though you're all covered up like Muslim women. Why do you think that is?"

"Those damn terrorist groups. They should castrate them all, no mercy."

"They already do."

"Only repeat offenders. They should do it to everyone, right from the start."

"And the innocent too, right? Just in case one day they snap and rape someone."

"Well, preventive castration's on the table. Plus, all penetration's rape, and…"

"Look, I'm done talking about this. You all disgust me."

"It's the truth."

"What's the truth? You really think your dad rapes me when we make love? You really believe that?"

She went quiet, staring at me. She bit her lower lip and said:

"Honestly, I don't get how you can let him penetrate you. What do you get out of it? It's a barbaric, savage, painful act that causes bleeding. Why do women need that?"

"Okay, penetration isn't painful because the vagina's elastic, and bleeding only happens the first time, if at all. Honestly, Vicky, your cult's feeding you nonsense," I laughed, thinking

of the garbage they teach girls. “Plus,” I went on, “I didn’t even bleed my first time, and your dad’s got… well, I won’t get into details.”

“Yeah, please don’t, or I’ll puke.”

I was offended, and she could tell. Then she said:

“Bottom line, penetration’s pointless. Only clitoral stimulation satisfies a woman.”

“That’s your opinion. Besides, we both get pleasure from it. Isn’t that fair?”

“No. If it’s something you don’t want, you shouldn’t go along with it.”

“But I *do* want it. I get a lot of pleasure from it. I make love with your dad because I love him, and because it feels good. He’s an amazing man.”

“I don’t buy it.”

“What don’t you buy?”

“That you enjoy it that much.”

“Of course, my pleasure’s fake, right? All in my head or from my upbringing, huh? Come on!”

“You’ve been brainwashed by the hetero-patriarchal society. It’s all about conditioning.”

“No, *you’ve* been brainwashed!” I snapped. “You and all the women your age, and plenty of mine. Don’t you see it? You eat because you’re hungry, not because you were taught to eat. Instincts are in our genes, and sexual instinct is genetic, not some choice or upbringing.”

“I don’t agree. You’re just stuck in the old society’s inertia, where women had to fulfill marital duties for financial support. That’s over. Women are free to choose our own paths now.”

“Sure. That’s why I freely chose mine, with your dad. Or are we not free to do that? Are we free for everything except that?”

My daughter seemed like a robot, answering coldly like an AI programmed with every slogan Elle and the Inquisition spewed. She was completely brainwashed.

“No, Mom. Understand, you’re with Dad because of the inertia of growing up in a hetero-patriarchal society.”

“No. I’m with him because I was attracted to him, sexually and otherwise, and above all, because I love him.”

“Oh… here we go with love again.”

“Yes, love! What’s wrong with that? Honestly, Vicky, I blame myself for letting you become the person you are.”

“What kind of person am I?”

“Someone with no feelings. Because you young women today, your hearts have dried up.”

“No, that’s not it. We’ve finally realized that a man’s ‘love’ is always self-serving. They just see us as females to penetrate. We’re objects to them—they objectify us. When they say ‘love,’ they mean sex.”

“You’re so wrong, Vicky.”

“No.”

“Yes. All of you who think like that are wrong. I’m not saying there aren’t cases—maybe even lots—where that’s true. But you can’t generalize like that.”

“Why not?”

“Because by doing so, you’re giving up on love, the most wonderful thing in this miserable world.”

“I don’t agree.”

“Well, it’s true. You’ve traded love for hedonism, but that’ll never make you happy—it’ll just fill you with frustration.”

“You can find love with another woman.”

“No. At most, you’ll find friendship.”

“That’s ridiculous! Plenty of women…”

“Look, maybe real lesbians can find that love. I suppose so. But not if you’re not one.”

“You’re wrong.”

“No. Love starts with sexual attraction, then grows into something bigger. Without that spark, you can’t light the fire, at least in most cases. Do you get me?”

“No, I don’t.”

“Well, truth is, women don’t usually get along with each other, especially long-term. It’s an evolutionary trait. Only with a man is living together easier, because it’s simpler.”

“Ha!” she scoffed. “There were tons of divorces in your time!”

“Yeah, because humans are naturally discontent. But with the right man, you can last a lifetime. That’s something you’ll never get with a woman, unless you’re a lesbian, of course.”

“That’s absurd.”

“Look, Vicky, I lived with some ‘friends’ in a shared apartment for a year. Friends, if you can call them that. We always ended up bickering over the dumbest things. Sure, that can happen with a man too, but usually, they give in, they yield most of the time.”

“Of course, because if they don’t, you won’t let them penetrate you. Gross!”

“No, Vicky.”

“What do you mean, no? Mom, men are like dogs—they only do tricks for a treat. They wouldn’t do or give in to anything without that nightly reward waiting.”

“Nightly? You really think couples do it every night?”

“Well, whenever they do.”

“No, Vicky, you’re so wrong,” I said. “I knew a grandpa who crisscrossed the city multiple times a day to drop off and pick up his grandkids from school. You really think he did that just for his wife’s sexual favors?”

“Yup,” she said, and I laughed.

“Seriously, Vicky, you know so little about married life at that age! Couldn’t he have just done it out of love?”

“No. Can’t be. Men are like animals, driven by instinct—the instinct to penetrate. If you castrate an adult, their life loses meaning, and they’ll end up killing themselves. That’s why it’s gotta be done in childhood, so that awful instinct never develops.”

I stared at her for a while, taking in what my daughter had become—a cold, unfeeling stone. I felt like crying.

“Vicky, I’m telling you, it’s worth taking the risk. Among other things, because the alternative’s worse. Sure, your relationship with your husband, partner, whatever you call it, might end badly, but you’ll always have your kids.”

“Ha!” she scoffed. “They end up kicking you in the butt too.”

“Yeah, I know that well,” I shot her a look. “But we women are emotional beings above all, and we need to love and be loved. We might not get the latter, but we can always love. And you always love your kids. By giving up love, you’ve given up kids too. Like I said before, you’ve traded love for hedonism, but that’ll never make you happy—it’ll just drown you in frustration.”

Concern

“Khaki, I had a fight with our daughter today that left me cold. I’m honestly scared she might report us. She’s completely in line with the System.”

“No way. I don’t see her doing that.”

“Remember how in Stalin’s communist dictatorship, kids reported their parents for being counter-revolutionaries?”

“Yeah, but…”

“What did we do wrong, Khaki?” I said, almost in tears. “What did we do wrong with our family? Why did we end up with a daughter like this?”

“We didn’t do anything wrong, Olivia. It’s this damn society—it’s stronger than us.”

“Maybe we focused too much on Tony since he was the first. I always kept him close. But Vicky… not as much. Truth is, we’ve never had a good relationship, her and me.”

“I always got along with her better than you did. At least when she was little.”

“Yeah, maybe there’s something to that idea that daughters get along better with dads and sons with moms.”

“No. It’s about personality. Tony’s still closer to you, though he’s been close to me too. Vicky? Neither here nor there.”

“She’s prickly, Khaki. Stubborn and rebellious about everything.”

“Don’t blame yourself, Olivia. That’s what I’m saying. The society we live in is so overpowering, parents can’t do much. Oscar says the same about his kids. It’s the same in every family.”

“Yeah, but if we’d tried harder, maybe…”

“Don’t beat yourself up. No one’s put in more effort than you to teach them Christian values and traditions. And what good did it do? We’ve lost both of them. Neither has faith.

Angie's still going to catechism because she's only ten. When she grows up, she'll end up like the other two."

"No, Khaki, you're wrong there. They might not have faith, I won't deny that, but at least Tony still holds the Christian values I instilled in him."

"I wouldn't be so sure. I think it's more his personality, just like Vicky's is what it is."

I went quiet, thinking about everything I'd talked about with my daughter that day. Then I added:

"We're gonna have to swap our room with Angie's so she doesn't hear us doing it."

"That's ridiculous. You think if she doesn't hear us, she'll assume we don't?"

"Well, yeah, but at least it won't be so in her face."

Our house wasn't big. Police salaries weren't great, and we lived off that for years until I started working. All the bedrooms were upstairs except Tony's, which was downstairs.

"Let's tell her to switch rooms with Angie. The little one's always with her anyway."

"She won't want to."

"Why not? Angie's room is bigger."

"She'll say no just to be contrary."

"Well, I'll tell her it's so we can keep a closer eye on her sister with her nightmares."

"Yeah, that could work."

"That way, I can get to her before she starts screaming and wakes us all up."

"By the way, what'd the psychologist say?"

"Same old. It'll pass, it's just her age… But I think it's all the crap they're putting in their heads."

"At school?"

"Probably. And what she hears from her sister. I think we messed up sending Tony downstairs."

"Well, it was so he could study better. Being by the garage, he could tinker with his stuff."

"Yeah, but you know Angie's always loved him."

"And still does."

"Sure, but since he started working, she doesn't see him as much, and Vicky's taken her over. I think she's a bad influence on the girl."

"Damn, it's wild that we have to say that about our own daughter. That we need to keep one sister away from the other because the older one's brainwashing her."

"What can we do, Khaki?"

"Nothing, Olivia. Anything we try won't do much."

I gave up. He was right. Society was stronger than us. So I hugged him, and we made love.

I don't know about him, but I savored that moment like it was our last. Like we were doomed to be torn apart by some strange fate. That feeling stuck with me from that day on, every time we did it—like everything was destined to end abruptly, sooner or later.

Society and its stupid rules were driving us all crazy, and couples like us were becoming rare. Only our church friends were a last refuge where we could vent. They were people you could talk to without them looking at you weird when you had to admit you lived with a man; when you said you had three kids, all with the same father, the only man I've ever been intimate with in my life.

The Date

Tony went to the meeting with some anticipation, set up by the artificial intelligence. When he called the number on the card and said who he was, the AI gave him a day and time, and he decided to go. It didn't make sense for someone so important to summon him to their apartment to talk about a car repair, good or bad. That's what servants were for. It was clearly an intimate encounter, as Frank had suggested. Though it was so weird…

But whatever, he told himself. Who knows! Maybe nymphomaniacs, like sirens or unicorns, actually exist…

It was late afternoon, almost dusk. He arrived at the address on the card and rang the bell. It was a tall residential building full of ultra-luxury apartments. A click sounded, and the door opened. He stepped into a stunning lobby that led to a courtyard packed with lush tropical plants, a small waterfall, and celestial music playing from somewhere. "This is paradise," he thought. "Whoever lives here has a ton of money."

In one corner of the garden was a booth with a man inside, probably a eunuch. The guy glanced at him, checked something on a screen, and stayed stone-faced otherwise.

Tony reached an elevator at one end, and to his surprise, it had no buttons. As soon as he stepped in, a friendly AI voice greeted him, the doors closed, and the elevator started moving. The voice added:

"Mrs. Arcan is waiting for you. Welcome."

The elevator stopped on one of the top floors, maybe the highest, and the doors opened directly into the apartment.

Tony stepped in, looking around, totally lost. He wasn't sure where he was.

The place was beyond lavish. A huge open space, over two hundred square meters with five-meter ceilings, soft bossa nova playing in the background, filled with display cases and vases of all styles. Marble statues, ornamental plants reaching the ceiling, silk fabrics, and intricately decorated tapestries… An absolute delight of a place, and whoever lived there had to be incredibly refined.

And yet, there she was, right in front of him, staring at him. He'd mistaken her for part of the decor.

“First off, forgive me for sending my secretary. I can’t expose myself. You understand, right?”

The woman speaking was about forty, not very tall, but wearing sky-high stiletto heels—something no self-respecting feminist, especially not high-society ones, would wear, since they had to keep up their “politically correct” image. Her hair wasn’t the usual short feminist cut; it was styled in a sophisticated design.

“Mrs.” wasn’t particularly attractive or had an especially stunning figure. She wasn’t obese—quite the opposite—but showed some flabbiness, likely from a sedentary lifestyle. All she wore, besides the heels, was a satin robe, slightly open, clearly showing her nudity. Her lips were painted red, her eyes blue.

“How do you know me?”

“A friend told me about you,” she said, stepping closer, hand on her hip, opening the robe a bit more. “She took her car to your shop recently. Said she’d found a top-quality male specimen.” She locked eyes with him, her expression lustful. “Honestly, she wasn’t exaggerating. If anything, she undersold you.”

She placed both hands on his chest, closed her eyes, and kissed him on the lips.

Tony was completely thrown off, stunned. He returned the kiss coolly and then gently pushed her away. Her robe fell to the floor, leaving her fully naked.

She wasn’t anything special, not even her breasts, which sagged like most women’s these days. No one wanted to enhance them with bras or anything, lest they be accused of being too sexy or feminine.

“What do you want from me?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” she said, eyes half-closed. “I want you to kiss me, touch me all over, and take me to the seventh heaven. Think you can do that?”

Tony smiled, and she started taking off his jacket, then his shirt, whispering in his ear:

“Kiss me, touch me, Tony. Take me to the seventh heaven…”

He got to work on the task at hand. He laid her on a large chaise lounge behind them and began kissing and caressing her, moving over her body with all the care and gentleness he could muster. His fingers explored her entirely, lingering in certain spots, and soon she reached her first orgasm, then another.

She lay back on the chaise, blissed out, and Tony started undoing his pants… until she stopped him.

"Now what do you want?" she asked.

"To finish, no?"

"You're done."

"Well, now it's my turn…" He was fully aroused, a noticeable bulge in his pants.

"You're not planning to do anything with *that*, are you?" she said, eyeing the bulge.

"How else?"

"Ugh, you're just like the rest," she waved dismissively, turning her head.

"Yeah, but…"

"Go to the bathroom and do whatever you need to there. Out of my sight, please."

"The bathroom?"

"Yeah. Door at the back," she pointed. "Left of the Apollo statue."

The Magazine

“So, how’d your date go?”

That was the first thing Frank asked the next day. For a moment, Tony almost spilled what happened but held back. He was embarrassed, feeling a mix of humiliation and being used, and decided to keep quiet.

“Nothing, just a mix-up, like you said.”

“Yeah?”

“They got the wrong guy. The lady apologized, gave me cab money for the trouble, and that’s it.”

“Figures. Too good to be true.”

“Exactly.”

All morning, he was distracted, replaying the previous afternoon. It was all so bizarre…

In the end, he let it go, deciding not to dwell on it. These were chaotic times, where the natural order was twisted upside down. The weirdest things happened, and this might not even be the strangest thing he’d face. In fact, much stranger things would happen later. But I’ll get to that.

Lunchtime came, and the mechanics and women went to the locker rooms to grab their food. There was a small break room in the basement with a couple of microwaves, and they usually ate there.

“Hey, what’s that?” Frank asked. “Is that what I think it is?”

When Ivan pulled his lunch container from his locker, a magazine peeked out from underneath. It was well hidden inside another magazine, a sneaker one.

“Yup. It’s what you think. A 20th-century porn mag.”

“How’d you get it? Those things are worth a fortune…”

“A magazine?” Tony asked. “On paper?”

“Yeah. After AIs scour the internet, deleting photos and videos and reporting server owners, this is all that’s left.”

They gave it a quick look, carefully—it was an illegal activity.

“Hey, it’s nice out. Why don’t we hit the park?” Tony suggested.

“Cool with me,” Frank said. “I’m sick of eating here with those loudmouths. We can barely hear each other. Grab the mag,” he told Ivan, “and we’ll check it out properly.”

The three left the shop with their lunch bags and the contraband magazine, carefully wrapped and hidden among vehicle repair manuals. They found a secluded spot in a nearby park and couldn’t wait to finish eating to take a look.

“It’s smuggled,” Ivan said. “This one came in a container from Norway, hidden with antiques.”

“Yeah, I heard something like that,” Frank said. “They found a stash of them in a storage unit recently. Some old guy living alone, hoarding memories…”

“I heard that too,” Tony said. “The Inquisition burned them all, I think.”

“I doubt they burned *all* of them,” Ivan said. “They’re worth more than gold. Everyone’s got a price, even the feminazi Inquisition. Maybe this one came from that stash.”

“I bet it’s common,” Frank said. “Someone gets one, takes pictures, then sells it.”

“Unless they’re using an analog camera and developing in their basement…”

“Well, if you’ve got an old tablet not connected to any server…” Tony pointed out. “They can’t track it from the cloud.”

“Don’t be so sure. The OS is designed for that. Even offline, it can send a radio signal.”

“Damn, the freaking Inquisition’s everywhere!” Frank griped.

“It’s Elle’s fault. I wish she’d drop dead.”

“Whoa, don’t say that,” Tony said. “Farse, the VP, is even more extreme. She’d castrate us all. Without anesthesia!”

“No kidding. And not just our balls—they’d take the ‘urinary organ’ too, as they call it.”

They all laughed.

“Man, they won’t even say its name, like they’ll get pregnant just by mentioning it.”

They cracked up again, harder this time.

“That’s what my sister Angie used to think when she was little,” Tony said. “She thought moms got pregnant just by thinking about it.”

“She thought that?” Frank asked, laughing again.

“Yup. Then she figured there had to be some male interaction, but thought a kiss was enough.”

They all laughed again.

“I bet she doesn’t think that anymore,” Ivan said. “Right?”

“Nope. Even though she’s only ten, they must’ve opened her eyes at school. God knows what nonsense they’ve stuffed in her head!”

The Gender Gap

That Sunday, Victor missed our family lunch. He got stuck with a 48-hour shift and couldn't join us. That left just three of us, since Angie was at a friend's for the weekend.

It'd been a while since all five of us ate together. Tony usually ate at the shop, Angie at school, so it was mostly just Vicky and me—the two who got along so well, sarcastically speaking.

"Wow, sis, a blouse with cleavage!" Tony said as he walked in, seeing his sister in something other than her usual t-shirts. "You going normal now?"

"No, idiot, this is Mom's. All my stuff's dirty."

"Yeah, the washer's still running," I confirmed.

"You think I'd go out like this? I'm not crazy!"

"Yeah, wouldn't want a guy to see you and fall in love," he jabbed.

Vicky made a face and said:

"Besides, 'normal' these days is how I dress. Only old ladies wear stuff like this," she gestured at the blouse.

"Hey, I'm not old," I said. "It's just that history's cyclical. My grandma was a prude, never showed anything, and now it's back to that. But things'll change."

"Mom, you're such an optimist," Tony said.

As usual, the conversation kicked off with a fight. To cool things down and shift gears, I tried steering it to neutral ground, asking about Tony's work. I thought car mechanics couldn't possibly spark a debate. I was wrong.

"I don't get why they can't fire all those women," I asked. "If they don't do anything, they shouldn't be there."

"Sure, they can fire them," Tony said. "But then they'd have to fire one of us too. Parity's sacred."

"But that doubles labor costs, right? The boss hires two people, but only one does the work."

"Yup. These ladies do nothing, and you can't fire them. But if any of us slacks off, we're out the next day. There's twenty mechanics at the door waiting to get in."

"Parity's a right," Vicky said. She'd been quiet, earbuds in, and I'd stopped bothering to argue with her. Better she kept her mouth shut.

"Yeah, sure, that's why it doesn't apply in offices," Tony shot back.

"Look, bro, I don't buy that those women do nothing. You're just a sexist who can't see the work they actually do. It's like in the patriarchal days—women worked harder than men, managing the house and kids, but since they didn't work outside, their 'masters' said they did nothing. Disgusting!"

"Seriously, they don't do anything?" I pressed.

"Pretty much nothing, Mom. For one, they don't know mechanics. But they don't even do stuff anyone could do."

"Like what?"

“Like unloading a truck of parts, pushing a car… It’s us doing it while they stand there watching.”

“Of course, you guys are stronger,” Vicky said. “You expect a woman to do animal labor?”

Good thing Tony’s got my temperament. If he had half of Victor’s, he’d have slapped his sister right then. Back when they were kids, they were always at it, fighting and biting, with Tony, despite being six years older, usually getting the worst of it. He took her comment in stride and said:

“Oh, so we’re not equal, huh?”

“We’re equal in rights.”

“Yeah, but not in duties, right? And not even in rights—you’ve got more. You’ve got the presumption of innocence in gender cases, more aid for disabilities, more job quotas. Come on!”

“That’s to close the gender gap.”

“A gap that doesn’t exist anymore, sis. Hasn’t for a while. If it ever did, it’s because mothers *chose*—you hear me, *chose*—to stay home and raise their kids.”

“Of course the gender gap exists, you phallocratic sexist!”

“They still teaching you that in the Inquisition?”

“It’s the truth. We need to give women visibility.”

“Visibility!” I jumped in. “All we see is women! We don’t even know what a man looks like anymore!”

Vicky laughed.

“Better not to. Unpleasant things are better left unseen.”

“So you think it’s fair that your brother busts his ass to keep his job while his female coworkers do nothing and can’t be fired. That okay with you?”

“And it’s not just that,” Tony added. “There’s a real problem with guys who can’t find work, period. That doesn’t happen with women.”

“So what if guys can’t find jobs now?” Vicky said. “We didn’t have them before, in the patriarchal days.”

“Yeah, but there’s a big difference, sis. Back then, women could live off their husbands, and if he died, they got a widow’s pension. Now? We’ve got neither.”

“It’s not that bad. There’s always jobs nobody wants. And if it is, so what? Now it’s your turn to suffer what we did.”

“Yup, the revenge theory,” Tony said. “Right?”

Vicky nodded.

“Seriously, Vicky, this obsession with making today’s men pay for their grandfathers’ sins, when they’re the ones who paved the way for equality.”

“More like superiority,” Tony added.

“They’re the ones who made that change possible. We should be kissing the ground they walk on! Isn’t that true?”

“You’re a collaborator, Mom. You’re helping perpetuate the patriarchy.”

“What patriarchy? We’ve got a full-on matriarchy now!”

“Oh, Mom,” she sighed. “You need intense reeducation. Hard to believe you’re a woman. It’s normal for this sexist to say that—you can’t expect anything else from him.”

“Hey!” Tony said.

“But for you to say it, that’s the sad part,” she went on. “Some think collaborators like you should be locked up for aiding the phallocratic system. But I’m more practical. You’re women like us, just badly raised. You need deep, proper reeducation.”

“Right. Women need reeducation if they do something wrong, but men don’t, huh? A guy who commits one of those crimes you hate so much, he doesn’t need it?”

“A man doesn’t need it because it’s pointless. They’re ruled by blind instincts. Any effort to tame them is a waste of time. The only option is castration—remove the testicles and their testosterone source, so they stop obeying their phallocratic urges.”

Tony burst out laughing.

“Mom, I swear she’s memorized that paragraph! Bet it’s straight out of an Inquisition manual.”

I sighed and nodded. “You’re crazy, Vicky. Completely crazy! They’ve brainwashed you and your whole generation.”

She didn’t hear that last part. She was too busy with her tablet, typing something. Probably replying to a chat.

“Can’t you put that thing down at the table? Who’re you talking to?”

She didn’t answer, just kept typing. A bit later, she added:

“A friend from the club. She was telling me she chatted with a guy thinking he was a eunuch, but when they met, he wasn’t castrated. Scared her to death! I think she’s gonna report him.”

“Report him? For what?”

“For deceiving her.”

“But did he do anything?”

“I don’t think so. Didn’t even touch her.”

“Then I doubt it’ll go anywhere. Unless her report says otherwise.”

“Look, Mom,” she stared at me. “Women don’t file false reports.”

“Of course, because we’re beings of light, right? How don’t you get something so basic? Evil doesn’t care about gender, Vicky. The only difference is men’s evil might be more violent, but women’s is subtler and lasts longer. Men’s evil is impulsive; women’s is more drawn out.”

She shook her head.

“No, Mom,” Tony said. “Women are heavenly angels who can’t lie. Not like us, all demons who just want to penetrate and lie through our teeth.”

“Well,” she said, still glued to her tablet, “some women might be bad.”

“Sure, and some guys might be good, right? But that’s not the norm, is it? The good ones have to pay for the sinners so justice is served, even if it means a lot of suffering.”

She didn’t respond.

“We’re back in ancient times, Mom,” Tony looked at me. “When a noble’s word was worth more than a commoner’s, a free man’s more than a slave’s, a white man’s more than a black man’s.”

“What’d you say?” Vicky finally reacted.

“You’re going down a bad path, Vicky,” I said. “Intolerance could come back to bite you too.”

“Us? Why?”

“Because when there are no men left to blame, they’ll come for you.”

“Who?”

“They’ll invent some enemy. Like women with big breasts, for being too feminine or too sexy.”

“They’re already doing that, Mom,” Tony said. “Breast reduction surgeries have skyrocketed.”

“Exactly. Once the hunt’s open, no one’s safe.”

Judith

The next time, she didn’t send her secretary. She called herself from a private number, using a voice filter so no one could tell it was her if recorded.

“Hey, Tony. It’s Judith.”

She hadn’t given her name at the first meeting, and with the altered voice, he didn’t know who it was at first. But he quickly wondered if it was the friend who’d “discovered” him and told “the lady” about his “high quality” as a male specimen. Maybe now it was her turn.

“Judith?”

“Yeah, man. We went to the seventh heaven last week. Don’t you remember? I want you to take me there again. Can you come this afternoon?”

“This afternoon? To do the same thing?”

“Duh. What else? Play chess?”

Tony hesitated, thinking about saying no, but fear kicked in. This woman had his number and knew where he worked. She could report him to the Inquisition, and he’d end up in jail.

“Alright.”

“Same time as last time.”

Riding his motorcycle to her place, he was tempted to turn back several times. Nothing had happened last time, and she didn’t seem like she’d report him out of the blue. But he’d already said yes, so he went.

When he arrived, she was already sprawled on the chaise lounge, wearing the finest, most exclusive lingerie underneath a blue tunic, with red stilettos to match.

She gave him the same lustful look and said:

“This time, I want you to take me to the eighth heaven, if it exists.”

“The eighth heaven?”

“Yeah. Take all this off, slowly. Very slowly, while you keep kissing and touching me everywhere. Like last time. I’m sure you can do it. You can take me to the highest heaven any woman could dream of. Right?” She pursed her lips, mimicking a kiss.

“I’ll try,” he said, without much enthusiasm or desire.

He took off his jacket, unbuttoned his shirt, and got to work, pretending she wasn’t the flabby woman in front of him but one of the girls from the magazine Ivan brought to the shop.

And he pulled it off. Judith was very satisfied, and, like the first time, the same scene played out, with a “happy ending” in the bathroom by the Apollo statue.

But this time, she was closer and more familiar.

“What do you do, Judith?”

“I’m executive vice president of a big multinational. Don’t ask for the name. You know I can’t share much about myself. It could compromise me…”

“You’re worried I’d blab about our ‘relationship,’ is that it?”

“You wouldn’t dare, would you?” she said, giving him a serious, threatening look.

“What would I gain from that?”

“Nothing. You’d have way more to lose.”

“I know. You know what?” he changed the subject. “I thought the friend you mentioned was calling me this morning…”

“Yeah, Miriam. She’d never call you for your services.”

“No?”

“She’s a dyke. Doesn’t know what she’s missing…”

“Oh!”

“But she’s got a nose for spotting good male specimens… like you,” she kissed him, placing both hands on his chest again. “Come on, take me to the eighth heaven again.”

Tony gave in. He had no choice but to be her personal gigolo… for as long as she wanted.

And that was the problem. He was stuck, between a rock and a hard place.

As long as things went well, she’d keep using him like a sex toy—the best one she could have. But even the best tools wear out or become obsolete. Eventually, they’re replaced, maybe just for something new. That day would come, sooner or later.

Tony knew it well—he’d been raised with that understanding. Any sexual relationship that objectifies its participants is doomed to end badly. Only love is the oil that keeps the engine from seizing, the lubricant that smooths all friction, the quality that makes relationships last and grow, even when sexual attraction fades.

Yeah, Tony knew it was only a matter of time before he was discarded like a broken toy. How long? Impossible to say. Only his effort to satisfy her could delay it.

He remembered Oscar's comment about male prostitution being almost nonexistent—"One gigolo for every hundred prostitutes, maybe." What a coincidence that he'd ended up as that exception. And without even getting paid.

He wondered who Judith's previous "toys" were and what happened to them. She hinted at it, always praising him over some hypothetical past gigolos she must've had, though she never named them. Comments like "You're the best I've ever had" or "No one's satisfied me like you" made it clear he wasn't the first.

And like any forbidden relationship, the only way to keep it secret when it ended was to eliminate the lover—hide the evidence of the crime. Her career was on the line if anyone found out she was meeting a man alone in her apartment. The feminist society propping her up wouldn't allow it.

But bailing now wasn't an option either. Judith was fiercely vindictive and wouldn't let her toy go the day after Santa delivered it. She still needed to use it more, get more out of it. The toy was still shiny and new.

Irnma

The woman who'd started at the shop with Tony, hired solely to meet parity quotas, was a Persian woman, about 50 or 55, though she looked much older. She had large eyes that must've been beautiful in her youth but were now dull, framed by wrinkles from a hard life. Still, she was warm and kind, easy to love despite being alone, unable to speak our language or that of her female coworkers. She acted like a mother to the guys, cooking them traditional dishes from her country or scolding them when they weren't clean. They didn't understand her words, but her melodic way of speaking made her "scoldings" feel gentle.

She had six daughters of various ages, left behind with her husband and family, who were goat herders in the mountains around their village. She'd come to the West purely for money.

One daughter had a rare disease that was progressively limiting her mobility, atrophying her muscles. She needed expensive treatments to slow the disability's advance. The girl had been promised in marriage to a man, a business partner of her father's, who agreed to wed her when she came of age. But he rejected her once her illness was known.

Despite these hardships, which she must've carried deep inside, Irnma sang all day, and Tony loved hearing her melodic songs. She had a stunning voice that could've made her a soprano if she hadn't been born in such a remote place.

Her musical way of speaking gave her a charm that drew people in. It wasn't the dry, choppy language the other women spoke but a soft, flowing one, and that's why Tony got close to her. With no hope of advancing in any job—since women held all the leadership roles—my son took up learning her dialect, Bakhtiari Luri, as a hobby, captivated by its musicality.

She spoke and sang in verse, always praising her little girl, whose illness was why she was in such a distant, different country:

"Aisha is the joy of our hearts, the pearl of our family, the star that guides us, the light that brightens our nights, the flower that cheers the desert, the water that brings it life, the rhythm that shapes our days. Oh Aisha, my beloved, my dear child! May Allah shower you with blessings and protect you always!"

Tony loved hearing those words and was eager to meet this girl so highly praised. Nearly all of Irnma's earnings went to Persia, and it had helped slow her daughter's disease, though the disability kept progressing. Tony also chipped in from his salary whenever they faced those costly treatments. Better to spend it on that, he said, than on smuggled porn magazines or photos like his coworkers did.

Learning the language wasn't too hard for him—he was good with languages. He asked an AI to teach him, practiced pronunciations, and had conversations with the app. Soon, he could hold simple talks, and in the mornings, when the shop was slow, he practiced with Irnma.

She lived with her brother, a Sufi, an older, kind, deeply religious man who didn't speak much of our language either. But he tried, greeting the mechanics when he dropped off or picked up his sister.

His name was Abdula, but everyone called him Mushir. Tony loved surprising him with Bakhtiari phrases whenever he showed up, and it delighted the man. They'd often chat for a bit after work, letting Tony practice the language.

Segregation

Daughters and mothers have always clashed. But my thing with Vicky was such antagonism that I'd often end up crying in my room, wondering what I'd done to deserve a daughter like her.

That day, I got home late from work. Traffic was a nightmare because the police were chasing a rapist and had blocked off streets to corner and catch him. I had no choice but to take the subway, which, naturally, was packed since traffic was restricted.

By that time, Vicky usually wasn't home—she'd head out to her feminist club in the afternoons. But that day, she needed money, and I hadn't wanted to send her my codes from a public place.

"You seriously got on a men's car?"

"I had no choice," I replied. "The women's cars were full, so I hopped on a men's one. Since fewer men work these days, they're sometimes almost empty. Good thing they only fine *them* for getting on ours."

"Of course! And they're emptier 'cause there are fewer and fewer left," she grinned. "Anyway, I couldn't stand having a guy in front of me or next to me, just staring."

"It's not that bad."

"What do you mean, not that bad? I can't believe they didn't stare at you."

"They did, yeah, but I think it was more surprise."

"And you weren't scared?"

"Nah. It's your generation they've drilled into that men are bad."

"They are."

"Women can be too."

"Don't compare, Mom."

"I am comparing, Vicky. Evil doesn't care about gender—there are lots of ways to do wrong. Not just violence."

"Yeah, like oppression."

"What oppression?"

"The oppression men have always put on women."

"Look, Vicky, they've stuffed your head with ideas that…"

"You're not gonna deny we were oppressed back then, right?"

"You sure weren't, and neither was I. That 'we' is a government trick to lump us in with supposedly discriminated people who…"

"Fine, *they* were. Women in the past were discriminated against and oppressed. That's undeniable."

"It's not undeniable. At least, it's debatable. But even if they were, they didn't know it, just like men didn't know they were oppressors, according to you. Life was hard for everyone. Men worked fourteen hours a day in the sun or mining, while women stayed home with the kids. I don't know which life was more enviable, and looking at it coldly, I'm not sure who

was more of a slave to whom. In the end, everyone accepted their role, and no one saw themselves as oppressor or oppressed. It's today's politicians who invented a problem that never existed, clearly to win votes from a supposedly historically wronged group. Don't you see it? Don't you all see you're being manipulated?"

Vicky laughed with a superior air. I don't think she even heard most of my argument and preferred to go back to before.

"I can't believe you weren't even uncomfortable."

"What do you mean?"

"On the subway."

"A little, yeah, 'cause I was the only woman. Everyone tried not to look at me, in case I reported them. You know, if they'd stared more than a second at certain spots, I could've."

"Totally. A key feminist advance, like so many we've won."

"It's ridiculous, Vicky. Feminists are why I felt that way. Back when there was no segregation, I never felt uncomfortable on the subway or bus."

"Back then, they weren't as horny as now."

"Well, tell me why, if that's true. It's not like they're popping testosterone pills on top of what they already have. It's the opposite—they slip bromide in the meat, FYI."

"That's a hoax."

"No, it's not. I saw a report on TV the other day. Bromide kills sexual desire."

"And why in the meat?"

"Well, 'cause men eat more of it."

"Anyway, I can't believe back when they didn't fine stares, you didn't feel uncomfortable."

"What do you think? That back then, since no fines, they were constantly ogling our breasts with their tongues out? You really believe that?"

"Yeah."

"Well, no, Vicky, it wasn't like that."

"I don't buy it."

"Sure, some did. But so what?"

"How awful!"

"Vicky, men aren't the savage beasts you paint them as. If a creep tried hitting on you and you weren't interested, you said no, and that was it."

"And he'd just leave, like that?"

"Of course! And if not, you'd slap him. That never failed. They'd freeze up completely. No need to call the cops or hunt down the Inquisition to defend your rights."

"Honestly, I don't believe it," she crossed her arms. "You all just gave in 'cause you were raised to please the male."

"What are you talking about? That's absurd!"

"It's Stockholm syndrome. You know what that is?"

“Yeah, I do. Is that what they tell you at that feminist club? Seriously, that the kidnapped person tries to please the kidnapper?”

“Mom, you were raised to satisfy men. You can’t deny it.”

“No one raised me like that. Plus, in a sexual relationship, satisfaction’s mutual.”

“Maybe in your case. Normally, the guy just goes for his own and doesn’t even try to satisfy the woman.”

“And how do you know that? Speaking from experience?”

“Ha!” she exclaimed. “I’d never have a sexist experience like that. As if… You really think I’d let a man enjoy my body?”

“You don’t know what you’re missing.”

Mushir

Tony was good with languages—no doubt about it, since he'd picked up Bakhtiari in no time. He still had a ways to go, sure, but he could already have a decent conversation with Mushir and his sister Irnma.

The man was shocked the first time Tony not only greeted him in his language but threw in a few phrases.

They always chatted when he came to pick up Irnma, and one time, they invited him to lunch.

The two lived in a modest apartment on the outskirts, and Tony didn't hesitate to accept. Sunday afternoons were boring, and he was already tired of going with Victor to practice motocross on the nearby trial tracks.

Yeah, my husband hadn't given up on bikes, despite that fateful day. Among other things, it was his job, obviously, though he could've stuck to the police BMW and nothing else. Nah, if you're born rebellious and a risk-taker, you never learn.

Oscar, his partner, wasn't big on motocross, and not wanting to go alone, as soon as Tony was big enough to ride one of those machines, he quickly got him hooked.

Influenced by his dad, the kid learned fast, and he clearly shared his genes—he wasn't half bad. He won the freestyle championship and came close to supercross too, as I've already told.

When Tony got to Irnma's apartment, the smell of stew was already wafting from the street. She'd made *khoresht*, a traditional stew from her homeland with meat, veggies, and beans, slow-cooked with spices and served with rice. For dessert, *zoolbia* and *bamieh*—fried dough sweets, crispy outside and soft inside, soaked in sugar syrup. They were a hit with Tony.

Mushir and he got along very well, despite the age difference and despite coming from such different cultures. The man was a widower with no children, and he never left the apartment except to take his sister to and from the workshop. He spent his days reading the Quran and studying the works of Sufi philosophers.

"Mushir, are you the chief of your tribe?"

"That's right, my son."

"Why?"

"Why is water blue?" he showed him a full glass. "Isn't it colorless?"

"Well, that's because there's only a small amount in that glass. When there's a lot, then it does appear blue. Actually, it is blue, but it's a very faint blue."

"That's how it is with the imam of a Bakhtiari clan. He only shows what he is when there are many."

Tony didn't quite understand the point.

"Why did you come to the West? Who is the chief now… the imam?"

"I am."

"Right, but you're not leading the prayer now."

“My brother is taking my place.”

“But you told me you don’t have brothers. Or did I misunderstand?”

“He means my husband” Irnma interjected.

“Ah!” Tony realized that in his language, there’s no word for brother-in-law.

“Tony, my brother has six daughters, and he has to keep an eye on them. That’s why I came, since I don’t have any. Children are the most precious treasure a man can have. When a man or woman dies, what do they take to the grave? What can they be most proud of, out of everything they’ve done?”

“Their family?”

“Exactly.”

“An irreplaceable treasure!” added Irnma, and began to recite poetry:

“My daughters!” she exclaimed. “Joy of the spirit, health of the soul, comfort of the migrant. Reason for life and sigh of the heart. Aisha, love of my life! Aisha, dream of my soul! What are you doing now? Are you embroidering your handkerchiefs with the finest thread? Are you combing your hair at the Kamirn fountain?”

Of course, Tony thought. Irnma couldn’t possibly know what her daughter was doing at that moment. In the remote village where they live, lost in the mountains in the middle of the desert, there’s no cell coverage. They could only speak to their family when someone went to the city.

“Your hair!” the woman continued. “Finest silk, smoother than the best of hides! A blooming carpet of the finest velvet!”

It was clear that for this woman, little Aisha—precisely because she was disabled—was the daughter she loved the most.

“Mushir, could I see a photo of your niece?”

Tony was dying to see her, so wonderful as she had been described.

“Haha” he laughed. “My brother guards his daughters like the most precious of treasures. If you were rich, would you display your gold for everyone to see?”

“No. Only I would see it.”

“That’s how it should be, my son” he patted him on the shoulder. “That’s how it should be.”

Sermon and Terrace

Dear brothers and sisters, we live in difficult times.

The chapter from Genesis we just read shows us the first human couple living a life of happiness and fulfillment in Paradise, right until sin entered the picture.

Whether we see the story of Adam and Eve as a fable or historical fact, what's true is it's a theological lesson we shouldn't ignore, and we can equate it to what's happening now.

Indeed, before, men and women didn't hate each other, and they lived lives—maybe tough, full of work and effort—but they faced hardships together. Families were united and gathered around God.

Until the same thing happened as in the Garden of Eden. The serpent appeared and deceived the woman.

The name "devil" etymologically means "the accuser" or "the slanderer," and that's what he's doing now, just like back then. He's accused the male part of humanity of things they haven't done; he's slandered, and with that, created division between the genders. Deception is his main weapon, like how he deceived Eve, another woman, who's always the weaker, more sensitive part of the human equation.

It's the Evil One's great triumph, and now he's licking his chops and laughing hysterically at this, his big feat. A feat as huge as when he got us kicked out of the Garden of Eden.

And his Victory is double. Besides dividing, he's pulled off another deception—the big lie of convincing women they'll be happier without kids. He's told them it's better to work and be barren than build a family that'll love them, care for them in old age, provide company and comfort in tough times, which always come in life.

Why else are women breaking records for anxiety and depression despite professional success? Simple: they haven't fulfilled themselves as mothers. They're missing the main thing —creating a family. They're missing kids, the true achievement and goal, the real happiness, which you only fully appreciate when you're older. Like Eve, woman has been deceived by the devil, who's made her voluntarily barren.

Brothers and sisters, barrenness is one of the traits defining evil. Because evil is barren by nature—it gives nothing and keeps everything for itself. It's not generous but selfish, unlike good, which is magnanimous and gives itself, giving life through love.

A family generates: it generates companionship and children. Today's feminism hates the family, so today's feminism is evil. What started as a noble, legitimate aspiration for equal rights and opportunities between men and women has turned into revenge with no winners or losers: everyone's defeated, everyone's a loser, men and women alike.

And you might ask: why has this happened? Well, I'll tell you. The devil's siren songs have only echoed because humanity has turned away from God. The Evil One now has free rein to roam the world like never before in human history, precisely because people want nothing to do with the One who gave them life, and the Creator respects our freedom to love or reject Him. We can't expect help from someone we've voluntarily distanced ourselves from. We can't expect warmth if we've moved away from the fire.

"You will be like gods," the serpent told Eve in Genesis 3:5, sealing the great deception; and woman believed it. Now man has rejected God and worships himself, with no one above him. And that necessarily means abandoning love and embracing hate. We hate those who don't worship us, and we've stopped loving. Because true love always involves unconditional

giving, which is a form of servitude. And how can someone be willing to serve if they're full of pride, arrogance, and hate? Others should serve them*, not the other way around.*

But brothers and sisters, we were created to love, so without it, we're unhappy. The serpent was very cunning, and that apple, though tempting, was poisoned.

Dear friends, many of you ask me over and over, "Father, how will this get fixed?" And the answer is there's only one way. The way the Bible itself reveals: when God's people stray, they suffer greatly, and can only be happy again one way: by returning to God.

***

"What'd you think of the priest's sermon?"

"I think he nailed it," I replied.

After mass, we'd met up on a café terrace with Pancho and Doña Guadalupe, two Mexican parishioners we were close friends with. In fact, Vicky and their daughter Mary were best friends, known each other since catechism days. The girl, just a year younger than ours, still went to church with her parents.

It was gorgeous weather, and Angie was playing with some friends on the street while we soaked up the sun and sipped vermouth.

"It's a shame there are barely any families like ours left," Doña Lupe said. "Of our friends from our youth, only one couple's still together… and who knows how long that'll last."

"Same for us," I added. "In our crew, there were tons of guys and girls, and now we hardly see each other."

"Of course," Pancho said. "If they'd had kids, at least we'd make an effort to meet up for the kids' sake. But now no one does."

"True," Victor added. "My two best friends' relationships tanked. One, Martin, was with his girlfriend Laura for a while and had a kid. But they split years ago. Same with Samuel and Lucy."

"Yeah," I said. "She was my closest friend—we lived together when I first came to the city. She hooked up with Samuel… but I haven't heard from her since. You heard from him, Khaki?"

"Yeah, he texts sometimes. Both him and Martin have been victims of this society, I'm afraid."

"Of the society of hate," Pancho pointed out.

"Exactly. It's sad. Those two live—or rather, barely get by—in tiny apartments, each on their own. Both alcoholics."

"What a shame. That's so common."

"And the kid they had…?" I asked. "What was his name?"

"Can't remember. I think his mom had him castrated right after they split."

"Damn, that's gross!" Pancho didn't usually swear, but he couldn't hold it in.

"Yeah, it's a shame everything's changed so much in so little time," Doña Lupe said.

"Well, actually, it hasn't been that little time," I corrected. "This stuff was already happening in our day. It's just generalized now, and with the government we have… it's getting worse."

“True,” she said. “I think us religious folks have been living in a bubble… on an island, while the world crumbled.”

“Yeah, and not just Christians. Maybe there were more people, but we were already few. I think our crew—Martin, Laura, Samuel, Lucy, Victor, and me—were following some inertia from our parents’ way of life. But yeah, it wasn’t that common anymore.”

“It’s what you say, Victor,” Pancho added. “This society’s swallowed us all.”

“It’s ‘cause we’ve forgotten what love is,” Lupe nailed the diagnosis. “Because love always involves some sacrifice, but it’s an investment worth it. And now no one accepts sacrificing even a little for anyone.”

“You hit the nail on the head,” her husband agreed.

“That’s it. No one knows what love is anymore, or how to love,” I echoed.

“And what is love?” Pancho asked, looking at us all.

No one knew what to say until Victor filled us in:

“Love is what makes an amazing woman like this,” he said, meaning me, “stick with a bum like me.”

Everyone laughed, and I turned red as a tomato. He went on:

“But it’s also a potion,” he said with an ear-to-ear grin.

“A potion?”

“Yeah,” he insisted. “A brew my wife gives me in the mornings when she makes breakfast. I think she slips it in my coffee, and that’s why I still see things no one else does.”

“And what does no one else see?” the other asked, curious.

“What I said. Love changes how things look. When no one else sees your wife as pretty or desirable anymore, you still see her as beautiful as ever.”

“You idiot!” I smacked his arm while everyone cracked up.

We were in the middle of that when Mary stood up. The girl hadn’t said a word or paid us any attention the whole time, and now she was looking back and forth between her mini-tablet and the street corner.

Then Vicky showed up. My daughter didn’t greet anyone at the table, and the only words she said were:

“Mom, gimme money.”

I sighed and replied:

“You could say hi first, no?”

“Hi,” she said, still staring at her friend.

“You out of balance already?”

“Yeah.”

“I gave you plenty last time,” I noted, pulling up my virtual card to transfer more.

“Yeah.”

“What’d you spend it on?”

“Dunno.”

“Could you manage a longer sentence?”

“No.”

The others laughed—I think to keep from crying—and I transferred some balance to my daughter’s card. Her mini-tablet beeped, she smiled, grabbed her friend’s hand, gave her a kiss on the lips, and vanished around the same corner.

As we watched them go, Victor asked:

“Hey, why do they kiss?”

“You living under a rock?” I said. “That’s normal, Khaki.”

“Really?”

“Duh! It’s the official greeting for girls.”

“Since when?”

“For a while, Victor,” Pancho said. “Hey, when you met up with your buddies, didn’t you do handshakes, shoulder bumps, stuff like that?”

“Yeah, something like that.”

“Well, this is the same.”

Compensation

He'd just finished masturbating her, and Judith was getting out of the shower. This time, she was in a rush to shower and wouldn't let the guy use the bathroom first.

"You done too?" she asked. "You didn't make a mess everywhere, right?" She looked around.

Tony didn't answer. He was still lost in thought.

"What's wrong? You were great earlier. You deserve a reward."

"You know what I'd like."

"Ugh," she grimaced. "Always the same. Can't guys think about anything but penetration? You gotta break free from that slavery, and the best way is castration. Why not do it? Huh? You'd still be useful to me the same way."

He almost told her he wasn't coming back ever, but fear hit again. That woman was proud and vengeful. A tyrant.

"Tony, an orchiectomy's a simple procedure, doesn't hurt at all. They make a small cut with local anesthesia in the sac that holds them and pull out the testicles. That's it! They don't touch the urinary member at all, and you can still pee standing like any other man. Honestly, I don't get why you're all so against it."

He felt like slapping her right then but held back. Instead, he said:

"What I don't get is how you're so against something as natural as penetration… especially between two people who love each other."

"I already told you no. Okay?"

"Well, there are other ways to satisfy a man without that."

"Oh… back to that," she grimaced again. "I've told you a million times I'm not touching *that*," she glanced at his boxers, "with any part of my body."

"Yeah, yeah," Tony turned his head.

"Come on, don't be mad," she hugged his neck. "You deserve a reward, but I don't know how to pay you. I can't give you money—you know that'd compromise us both. You could get accused of rape, me of having a boyfriend. That'd ruin my career at the company, and my rivals would pounce."

"Why?"

"'Cause I want to be named president at the next shareholders' meeting. Actually, I've been tempted not to call you lately, to avoid risks. But see, I can't go without you," she kissed him.

"Tony," she went on, putting a hand on his shoulder, "if money wasn't digital, I'd give it to you. But you know it leaves a trail. You want something else?"

"Like what?"

"A car, for example. What model you like?"

"I don't like cars."

"Really?"

“Well, maybe it’s that ‘cobbler’s children go barefoot’ thing.”

“A bike, maybe?”

“I’ve got bikes. You know I competed in…”

“Yeah, yeah. I know.”

That’s when the idea hit him. Actually, he wondered how it hadn’t occurred to him before.

“Hey, why don’t you do something?”

“Whatever you want. Except the forbidden stuff, I’m all yours,” she ran a finger over his lips.

“There’s a girl, daughter of a coworker at the shop, with a rare degenerative disease. Her mom and uncle came from Persia to make money here for her treatments. Now she needs an expensive surgery they can’t afford. Could you help them out?”

“Of course!” she exclaimed. “Ah! I love that stuff! Plus, contributions to free women from macho countries get huge tax breaks!”

“Well, this isn’t exactly ‘freeing.’”

“Why not? Isn’t that girl under a yoke?”

“The yoke of her disease.”

“Exactly. But only you and I know that. The State Department clerks have no clue and never will. Come on, tell me. How much does she need?”

The Raid

It was an old abandoned industrial warehouse. They'd gotten a radio call that a group of possible drug traffickers had holed up there after being chased by police. They'd escaped a raid and gone back to what was likely their operations base. Though assigned to traffic, a cop's a cop, and the four officers were the closest to the warehouse.

When they arrived, Oscar launched a small drone over one of the upper windows, and it started transmitting images to the mobile device in his hands.

"There's six," Victor said. "Four women and two men. *Castrati*, I bet."

Oscar's new partner glanced at him. He was a eunuch too, and that was a derogatory comment.

"Sorry," the boss apologized. Albert shrugged it off and kept looking at the screen. Deep down, he was used to it.

"They're punks," Angela noted. "See the mohawks?"

Sure enough, most had big, bright-colored mohawks rising from shaved heads.

"I hate them so much…" Angela added. "What's the plan?"

"Distract them till backup arrives," Oscar said. "Albert and I'll stay at the entrance—you two go in and scare 'em a bit. I doubt they're armed."

"Don't count on it with punks," the woman corrected. "I know them well—they're not just into glue."

"Come on, let's go!" the boss urged, and he and his partner started moving in slowly.

As good pros, they knew the codes and visual signals, coordinating to sneak toward where the women were gathered. They dodged rusty machines and big gears lined up in rows, finally reaching the spot.

The punks were ultra-feminist fanatics with some impunity. They were said to be Elle's "praetorian guard," or as many called them, "Elle's youth brigade," a collective of thousands of women living in squatted houses where cops didn't even dare enter.

These were young. They were standing, arguing about where to hide the glue cans—their merchandise for other dealers—when the two cops jumped them.

"On the ground!" Angela yelled, firing into the air. "Police! You're all under arrest!"

Of course, none obeyed and scattered. The two eunuchs and two women bolted for the exit, while the other two headed back, probably to ditch the glue cans.

Victor chased one, Angela the other. As a good cop, she quickly took down her suspect and cuffed her to a pipe.

But his partner wasn't so lucky. The woman, with a flashy bright green mohawk, had locked herself in a bathroom and started dumping the glue down the drain.

The boss kicked the door down and pointed his gun, forcing her out of the stall.

"Well, well! A fascist macho!" she said as she came out. "Didn't know they still let phallocrats like you on the force…"

"Shut up!" Victor spun her roughly to cuff her, but she twisted away.

“Let go! Don’t you dare touch me! Hear me?” she bared her teeth. “Or you want your balls cut off?”

Just then, the punk screamed in pain. Someone behind her had punched her in the ribs.

“I’ll cut *your* tongue, bitch!”

Angela had just arrived and jammed her gun into the punk’s kidneys. She spun her around to face her and said:

“Open your mouth!”

“What?”

“Open your damn mouth, I said!”

“Angela, that’s enough,” Victor said.

“You, shut up. Okay?”

“Open your mouth, damn it!” she pointed the gun at her teeth, and the girl whimpered, opening it timidly.

“Now you’re all soft, huh? You were real tough with my partner, but it won’t be so easy with me.” Her hateful glare would’ve intimidated anyone.

With the gun, she smacked her teeth and shoved the barrel down her throat, making her gag and vomit.

“You needed something hard like this shoved in… but made of flesh, bitch!” she muttered as the punk puked her breakfast, kneeling on the floor. Then she turned to Victor and said:

“Khaki, cuff her and take her to the other one. I’m gonna check the entrance.”

Sure enough, there was chaos at the door. Oscar and Albert were holding off the other four trying to escape.

“You’re under arrest for drug trafficking, resisting authority, and threatening an officer,” he read her rights, and the girl didn’t say another word. She couldn’t have been more than 18 and was definitely “soft” now. After taking her to the other and cuffing them together, he headed where the rest were.

The others were way more aggressive, and that’s saying something. Even though the eunuchs said nothing, they screamed all kinds of insults, with “sexists” or “phallocrats” being the mildest. Only Angela’s presence calmed them a bit, though they insulted her too, with “collaborator” maybe one of the tamer ones.

Finally, a police van arrived, and they loaded them all in, only managing it at gunpoint.

Tea Time

That Sunday, they invited him again to lunch at Irnma and Mushir's. Actually, they extended it to Victor, me, and the girls, but as always, my husband's shifts kept us from going.

Really, both the mother and uncle of the girl were super grateful for all the contributions he'd made to cover the girl's medical costs. Even before that huge cash infusion from Judith, they already saw him as a son.

That day, Irnma had made a killer chicken stew with pasta and veggies, richly spiced Persian-style. The pasta was delicious, and now they were enjoying some great tea.

"Life's a shooting star flashing through the starry night, Tony."

The man loved fables and their lessons, always speaking figuratively.

"That's life, Mushir?"

"You see it streak across the moon's glow in an instant, then vanish over the desert dunes."

Tony loved hearing those stories from the man—it helped practice a language he adored. Without much else going on, he'd dived headfirst into studying it, and now he was hooked on Persian culture and history, his coworker's homeland.

"But the beauty and shine of that star is nothing, son. Know why?"

"No, Mushir, tell me. Teach me with your wisdom."

"'Cause if you tell your friend, 'Look! Look how pretty!' he'll say, 'I don't see anything.' He won't believe you," he burst out laughing. He always had those booming laughs.

"Of course. The star's already gone. Right, Mushir?"

"Exactly. I see you're learning. So that's life, my son. Fleeting as a star. Something only you can see. Others don't exist."

"So I should only worry about my own well-being, Mushir?"

“No! Not at all! It means you gotta make sure your friend sees it too. You both have to be looking the same way!”

“Oh, got it!”

“Yeah, Mushir, I get it now.”

Just then, Irnma came into the room. She’d stepped away for a call, and now she let out a joyful shout.

“What happened, sister?” Mushir asked.

“Aisha! The surgery was a success!” she exclaimed, as always in verse. She’d just gotten a call from the city near their village, where the girl had been operated on. Irnma continued:

“The doctors say she might walk. Standing for sure!” she shouted again. “My mother was right! Did you hear, brother? She guided us here!”

Mushir stood, and Tony did too. Tears welled in the man’s eyes, and his sister hugged the boy, saying:

“Thank you! Thank you! Thank you so much! If not for your money…”

“No, it wasn’t my money.”

“Well, but you convinced that person. How can we thank her?”

“I’m afraid it’s impossible. She wants to stay anonymous.”

“Oh, Tony, thank you so much! Thank you!” they thanked him again, then knelt and gave thanks to Allah for such a favor.

“Tell her from us that we’re so happy. We’re so happy!”

“I will.”

“What can we do for her?”

“Pray, Mushir, pray,” he replied without thinking. “She’s someone who really needs God’s help.”

“He sent you to get her help! You’ve been Allah’s tool!”

The Doll

“Did you know in Australia they had to bring in foxes to deal with a rat plague?”

“Seriously? That many rats?”

They were back in the park during lunch break. Ivan had brought some smuggled photos again, and Frank was eager to check them out.

“It’s not that there were tons of rats,” Ivan clarified. “The problem is you can’t use rat poison.”

“Yeah, I get it. You can’t kill vertebrate animals,” Tony realized.

“Not directly, of course. Another animal can kill them, but you can’t.”

“Man, it’s all such hypocrisy… Here we can’t kill animals, but we buy imported meat. Soon they’ll do it with insects too, and we won’t be able to eat those either. Just plants… and only ‘cause we can’t live off air, otherwise…”

“Give it time. Once they invent chemical foods, they’ll ban plants too.”

“For now, trees are untouchable, even bushes. You can’t trim hedges, and if they’re in the way, you have to transplant them with a ton of permits. If one dies in the process, get ready for hefty fines. Maybe even jail if it’s a tree.”

“Like I said, even plants have more rights than us.”

“And objects too,” Ivan added. “Like dolls, for instance.”

“Ha! I know where you’re going with this,” Frank jumped in.

“I’m lost,” Tony complained.

“You know who Han is?” Ivan asked.

“Sounds familiar…”

“Come on, man,” Frank said. “He was our old supplier for automatic calibrators.”

“Oh, yeah. The Chinese guy.”

“That’s him.”

“Well, the other day he posted a photo with a big ear-to-ear grin and a thumbs-up.”

“A photo?”

“Yeah. With a box. I think it was a doll.”

“A doll?”

“You know… a sex robot. Life-sized, judging by the box.”

“But… aren’t those banned?”

“Of course they are! It’s objectification of women, so it’s a hate crime. If the Inquisition catches you, you’re toast. You can have a plush pet, but not a woman.”

“Look, this whole ‘objectification of women’ thing is a feminist invention to enforce chastity. If a man can’t think of a woman in sexual terms, how are we supposed to have relationships? I can’t be intimate with a woman if I’m only thinking about her intelligence.”

“That’s the point, buddy—they don’t want us to have them. You can’t call them beautiful or give any compliments, ‘cause that’s objectifying.”

“I totally disagree. Beauty’s a virtue and praising a woman’s beauty should be something they’re proud of, not an insult.”

“Yeah, but they don’t want to be seen ‘just’ as that,” Frank noted.

“Sure, but that’s the problem in their heads,” Tony said. “That inferiority complex that makes them think they’re ‘just’ seen as that. The word ‘just’ is the key. Can’t a beautiful woman also be intelligent, brave, a great businesswoman, and all the qualities they *do* like? Huh?”

“Yeah, of course she can be all that. But they’ll only get offended if you mention *that* one, even if you list the others in the same sentence. That’s how they’ve been brainwashed, man.”

“Yep. To the point that even doing it with a doll is rape.”

“Well, the penalties might not be the same, but… seems like dolls have rights too.”

“Tony, they hate us,” Frank added, “and they hate us enjoying ourselves, any way we do it.”

“Plus, what?” Ivan went on. “They’ve humanized animals, giving them the same rights as anyone, and now robots. But an unborn fetus or a man? Zero rights. They’re not people, and you can kill them whenever.”

“Fetuses, yeah, and men… not much longer.”

“Hey, but Han’s risking someone snitching, right? If any of us rats him out to the cops, the judge’ll issue a search warrant and take the doll, no?”

“Yeah, and they’ll throw him in jail for abusing ‘vulnerable groups,’” Ivan replied.

“Meaning women.”

“Exactly. But this guy doesn’t care anymore. They took his business for not hiring enough women, and he’s ready to shoot anyone who steps into his house.”

“I believe it!” Frank said.

“That doll must’ve cost him a fortune…”

“Probably. He must’ve blown what little money he had left after they seized his business.”

“They’re *that* expensive?”

“I think they cost at least a year’s salary,” Frank explained. “The manufacturers take a big risk, so they charge for it. But you know how it is—if there’s demand, someone’s always willing to supply.”

“One day I’d love to talk to him,” Ivan said. “See if they’re as good as they say. I hear the latest models don’t just talk with AI—they even regulate body heat. Keep the silicone and gel they’re made of at 37 degrees.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah. They’ve got a system of resistors powered by batteries to maintain the temperature as long as you need. Just plug it in before you use it, and you’re good.”

“Wait, wait. If you have to plug it in, why does it need batteries?”

“Well, you plug it in to recharge the batteries. It detects your presence and warms up on its own.”

“No way!”

“Yeah, man. These things are super advanced. Like, you’ve got it in your bedroom, lying on your bed, and when you walk in, it knows to get ready. Unlike the old models you had to lube up to avoid friction, these self-lubricate. It detects you, starts warming up and lubing itself, and whispers horny talk while you’re undressing. So you’re ready to go, and by the time you hit the bed, it’s good to go too.”

“Damn!” Frank was practically drooling. “With a chick like that, ready to please without complaining, friendly, warm, and saying what you want to hear, who needs a real one? Shame they’re illegal!”

“Well… what can I say!” Tony objected. “I’d take a real one any day. Flesh and blood. They warm up and lube up on their own too.”

“Same here,” Ivan agreed. “I’d even take an ugly, grumpy lesbian over a rubber doll. But when you’re starving, crumbs’ll do, right?”

Worrying News

Mass was over, and Father David's homily had left us pretty worried. We'd already heard the news in the press, but we were anxiously waiting for Sunday to hear what the priest had to say.

As usual, we sat near Don Pancho and Doña Guadalupe.

"What do you think's gonna happen, Victor?" the man asked.

"No clue. Maybe it's all just Elle's bravado. They banned 'penetration,' as they call it, but they haven't put a feminazi in every bedroom to check if we're complying."

"Yeah, but this is different. They can't do that, but they *can* shut down all the churches and arrest every priest."

"They did that in Spain in 1936," I pointed out.

"Well, yeah, and in Mexico a few years earlier during the Revolution, and in the Soviet Union for 70 years."

"All dictatorships go after the Church, no doubt," Pancho continued. "I fear the worst. Only a miracle can save us."

"Well, if that's the case, miracles happen, Pancho," Victor said. "I can vouch for that."

"You talking about what happened in Medjugorje?"

"Exactly."

"What's this Medjugorje?" Mary, their daughter, asked. Guess her parents hadn't told her.

"It's a place in Bosnia where the Virgin Mary appeared to some visionaries," I started explaining. "Victor and I went there when we were young, during a tough time in our lives, and we came back renewed."

"You guys saw the Virgin?"

I looked at Victor. He still got chills remembering it. Then he answered:

"A lot of people have asked me if I believe those visionaries saw the Virgin. Honestly, I don't know. What I *do* know is she appeared to me."

"For real?" The girl's eyes and mouth were wide open. "What'd she say?"

"Marry that blonde."

"What blonde? Olivia?"

I laughed and nodded. Victor continued:

"I felt a presence, Mary. I couldn't tell you exactly what it was, but ever since… I think I'm a different person."

"Well, well," I smiled. "Deep down, he's still a bit of a rogue. Come on, let's go outside and see what the priest says."

Sure enough, a group of the "most notable" parishioners had gathered, and Father David was starting to speak.

"They're demanding we institute parity at all levels of the hierarchy, stop condemning homosexuality, admit non-Catholics, lesbians, everyone into heaven… regardless of their sins."

“Is that possible, Father?” Victor asked. “I mean, about the sins.”

“No, son. The Church can’t decide that.”

“Then who can?”

“It’s not up to us. Only God can have mercy on sinners, and neither priests nor bishops can teach anything different from what Jesus Christ preached.”

“The Protestants already did it,” another man noted.

“That shows their lack of authenticity, don’t you think? Only in tough times do you see the true value of things.”

“But, Father, can’t we defend ourselves against the hate crime accusation?”

“That’s easy. Whether they believe us is another thing.”

“What do you mean?”

“The Church doesn’t hate homosexuals or lesbians. It just points out certain practices that can be an obstacle to eternal salvation. That’s it.”

“That’s it and that’s enough, Father,” Pancho said. “That’s plenty for Elle to condemn us… to hell.”

“True, but it’s the same as pointing out other ‘practices’ among heterosexuals. Sex outside marriage, for example. Or certain ‘things’ someone might do alone in their room. It’s not exclusive to one group.”

“Of course, Father,” another parishioner said. “If anyone should be jailed for hate crimes, it’s them. *They’re* the ones who hate the most!”

“Exactly! They hate a vulnerable group! That’s what we are now,” another added. “Leave us alone!”

“What do you think, Father, about this idea that the Church needs to modernize and adapt to the times?” Pancho asked.

“It’s nonsense. Times are always changing, and the Church can’t be at the mercy of the winds. This could change tomorrow or next century. Where would that leave us? Besides, if we always had to obey the state in everything, we’d have had to worship the Roman emperor when they demanded it. We’d have been sentenced to death if we didn’t.”

“Which is what the Protestants are doing now,” Victor pointed out. “Worshipping the emperor.”

“Exactly.”

“So what’s gonna happen now?” Doña Guadalupe asked.

“I don’t know. We expect the Pope to make a statement before the deadline they’ve given us.”

“And what do you think he’ll say?”

“He won’t give in. You can be sure of that. If Elle goes ahead with banning us…”

“What?”

“Well, like in the Roman Empire, we’ll go back to the catacombs. What choice do we have? And may God help us.”

People started to disperse, all of us downcast and somber. Victor stepped away to talk with Pancho, and I stayed a bit longer with the priest.

“Father, what about women? Can’t something be done?”

“The priesthood is a burden, Olivia. It’s not what they think—a power trip or a privilege. Especially in times like these. It’s about preserving what’s most valuable to us: women.”

“I understand.”

“Besides, even if we did, what good would it do to give in? They’d just find another excuse to keep persecuting us. If the Church is still alive after 2,000 years, it’s because it hasn’t bowed to the pressures of power. If it had become a state organ, as they’ve often asked, we’d have disappeared long ago. The next change of government would’ve wiped us out. These are bad times, Olivia.”

“They’ve never been good, Father.”

“True.”

“What do we do now?”

“If the worst comes… we’ll have no choice but to embrace martyrdom.”

“Martyrdom?”

“Yes, Olivia. Elle is the new Nero, and like the first Christians, God calls us to martyrdom. We must accept it, as Jesus Christ, the Innocent, the first martyr, did.”

Practicing Bakhtiari

“Please say this sentence: ‘The woman is bringing firewood to prepare food.’”

“Zan baraye tahaiieh ghza npanism miavard.”

“Correct. Now say this one: ‘The father of the family is building a tent with goat skins.’”

“Pedar khanavadeh ba poost gosfand chadari sakht.”

“Incorrect. You said, ‘The father of the family built a tent with sheep skins.’ You got the verb tense and the direct object wrong. Try again, please.”

“Pedar khanavadeh dar hal sakhtan chadar ba poost bez est?”

“Correct. Now say this one: ‘The girl is playing in the courtyard with her friends while her brothers hunt butterflies.’”

“Dokhtark ba dostanesh dar hayat bazi khahod kard, dar hali keh baradaranesh parvaneh shkar mikonand.”

“Almost correct. You should’ve used the verb ‘mikand’ instead of ‘khahod kard.’”

“Oh, right!”

“Want to move to the next lesson?”

“Yes, please.”

“Alright. I’ll present a conversation between two people, and I’d like you to answer some questions about what they discussed. Ready?”

“Yeah, whenever.”

“Salam dost man, halt chetoreh?”

“Diruz shma ra dar masjed nadidam.”

“Baraye man khob pish mireh. vagheiat in est keh man diruz mariz bodam.”

“Mariz? Chon? Cheh belayi sarat omodeh?”

“Man sarma khordeham.”

“Sobh ta hala koja bodi?”

“Man pish dokter bodam.”

“Can you turn that crap down? I can hear it from upstairs!” Vicky had just stormed into his room, furious, slamming the door against the wall. “God, it sounds like birds talking…”

Tony gave her a serious look and paused the machine. Then he exclaimed:

“Zabonto ta tah kont bebar, lezbin kucholoye ahmagh! [Stick your tongue up your ass, you stupid dyke!]”

“What’d you say?”

“I said… yeah, I’ll turn it off. It’s that loud?”

“Yeah, damn it. Enough with that crap every night. You could at least use headphones.”

“Guys, what’s going on?” I came in from the kitchen, where I was finishing up the dinner dishes.

“Why do you say ‘guys’ and not ‘girls’?” Vicky snapped. “Right now, it’s 50-50.”

“Well, if it’s 50-50, it doesn’t matter, does it?”

“No,” Tony said, mimicking his sister’s voice. “We gotta give visibility to women, Mom.”

I laughed, which pissed her off. Then I explained:

“In this case, priority goes to the older person. In this case, Tony.”

“Yeah, yeah… You’re disgusting sexists,” she declared.

They were about to go at it again, so I had to cut the conversation short.

“Alright, enough. Can you tell me what’s going on, honey?”

She made a dismissive gesture and explained her bad mood:

“This guy. He’s driving me nuts every afternoon with those birds.”

“What birds?”

“That language he’s learning. Sounds like birds, not people.”

“You could turn it down a bit, Tony,” I suggested.

“It bothers you too?”

“Well, not really, but…”

He typed something on the machine, and the screen went off.

“You didn’t have to turn it off, son.”

“It’s fine. It’s getting late, and I’m heading to bed,” he stood, stretching. “I only turn it up this loud when Dad’s not here.”

“Yeah, so you don’t bother him if he’s sleeping.”

“Exactly.”

Vicky left, and I looked at Tony’s room. It was a mess—clothes on the bed, various electronics he was calibrating, pairs of shoes scattered on the floor, and stuff pulled out of a drawer he hadn’t put back.

“Something wrong, Tony?”

“With me? Why do you say that?”

“You’ve been… different lately. Thoughtful… a bit distant.”

“Nothing’s wrong, Mom.”

“I don’t buy it. You’ve been acting strange. What’s going on?”

“I don’t know why you say that. I’m the same as always. What am I doing that’s strange?”

“Well, for starters, you’re learning a super weird language. Your clothes sometimes smell like really expensive perfume…”

“It’s my coworker. I told you. I like her language, so I’m learning it.”

“Yeah, and the perfume? You’re not gonna tell me it’s hers, ‘cause I won’t believe it.”

“Why not?”

“‘Cause when you come back from her place, you smell like spices. Curry, oregano, something like that. That fragrance I’ve smelled on you is from a brand that woman can’t afford. Especially since she sends most of what she earns back home.”

Tony stared at me, clearly scrambling for an excuse.

“Maybe a client at the shop. She comes by a lot, and her car smells like that. When I test-drive it, I take it for a spin… That’s why.”

I stayed quiet. I didn’t say that smell would’ve stuck to his work overalls, not his clothes, which would be in the locker room.

“Yeah, yeah…”

“You don’t believe me?”

“You know what you’re doing, Tony. But you know if there’s anything you want to tell me… or if you’re mixed up in something…”

“Yeah, I know. You’re there for me.”

“Exactly. Me or your dad, you know that.”

The Pope's Speech

The deadline to comply and avoid the dissolution and banning of the Church, and to prevent practicing Christianity from being deemed a crime, was tomorrow. The family had gathered in front of the TV, as the Pope had announced an address.

At the appointed time, the pontiff appeared at the Vatican window. He was a simple, elderly man with a slight tremor in his right hand, holding just a small piece of paper with a few notes. He didn't want to read a formal speech and tried to speak naturally.

"We've been asked to apologize. Well, as the head of the Church, I publicly apologize for all the uncharitable acts committed by my predecessors or those under their charge in the past. I deeply regret them and propose a commission to study how we can make amends for those lapses in charity.

That said, for years we've been told the Church needs to adapt to the times. That it's outdated, behind, and needs to modernize. And indeed, all those who say this agree on one thing: we're divergent, not compliant. 'I came to bring fire to the world, and how I wish it were already burning,' said Jesus Christ, the God we worship.

And the 'times' have been very different throughout history, ever since God chose a people to reveal Himself to, the Jewish people.

If the Church had to adapt to the times, it would've had to condone and support the live sacrifice of children to Baal or Moloch, the gods of the peoples who subjugated those first believers in the true God. Later, it would've had to worship the Roman emperor, as required of all citizens of the empire Christians were part of. It would've had to accept the divorce and repudiation that Greco-Roman patricians practiced on women they grew tired of, leaving them and their children on the streets with no choice but prostitution to survive. Those were the winds of the times we lived in!

But whether the Church wants to adapt to the times or not, the fact is, it doesn't just not want to—it *can't*.

The Church is a divine institution, and as such, only God can change it. In fact, He already did when He came to the world just over 2,000 years ago. The Church, by which we mean God's people, lived under rules that needed reform, and the Son of God came to reform it and establish new ones.

In short, the Church can't, with its hands tied, approve or consider as non-sinful any sexual relationship outside marriage or not between a man and a woman. In fact, nothing objectifies a woman more than a sexual relationship not open to life.

That doesn't mean we don't welcome sinners with all our love, as our Lord did. That we don't promote their integration into a family and guarantee them heaven if they repent. In short, the Church doesn't hate anyone. It doesn't hate homosexuals or women. We don't hate the sinner, only the sin.

I repeat, these rules weren't made by men. If they were, they could be reformed, like any human institution. They were set by Jesus Christ, who told us: 'Keep all that I have taught you until I return.'

We can, however, change what doesn't contradict our Founder's teachings—Jesus Christ—like liturgy and formal aspects of dogma. We can change the form, but not the substance, and in this regard, we're open to dialogue with civil authorities.

We can also negotiate women's roles within our institution. Though we must always consider that women are the fundamental pillar of any society, as they're responsible for its continuity. And in this sense, we believe they should be spared any burden that hinders the extraordinary task the Creator assigned them as life-givers. Evangelization is a tough, costly task that often leads to martyrdom, especially now. So we must reserve that burden for those with greater endurance, to preserve women for the noble task of motherhood, a task denied to us men.

On the other hand, while it's true that sins called 'of the flesh' close heaven to those who die unrepentant, it's no less true that others, seemingly less important but just as grave, do too. I mean things like hatred, resentment, vengeance, abuse of power, lack of forgiveness, or lack of generosity. Sins just as serious, if not more so, than those the government so fixates on when demanding this change.

Today, women still sacrifice their children to Moloch, only now that god goes by a different name. Now it takes the name of each of those mothers, the only god those women obey and worship, the god of selfishness. We can't adapt to the times and stop condemning abortion, just as we didn't stop condemning the sacrifice of those innocents to that cruel god. The god of selfishness isn't generous and doesn't want to give life, because it's the god of death.

And with this, the Church doesn't 'attack women' but, on the contrary, prevents them from committing such a horrific act as murder, and worse, murdering their own child. An act that always leaves scars on women, scars they often never overcome, even long-term.

We're for life, not death, especially when the one dying is an innocent. An innocent condemned to die, accused of apparently one unforgivable crime: the crime of simply wanting to live.

To conclude, I don't want to leave without one final thought.

Today, the Church stands before Pilate again, demanded to renounce God under threat of death. But as on that infamous day over twenty centuries ago, this servant neither can nor will deny the One for whom we all live, our Lord Jesus Christ. He was crucified for resisting the authorities, and I, His humble servant, can aspire to no less.

Thank you very much.

Family Dinner

It'd been a while since all five of us had dinner together; someone was always missing. Victor's shifts were unavoidable, and Tony was coming home later and later from work. Meanwhile, Vicky hardly ever ate dinner—she was hell-bent on sticking to a strict diet to hit a certain weight to ace the tests for the military academy.

So, most days, it was just Angie and me at dinner. But that night, the stars aligned, and we were all home. Even more, Vicky wanted meat and heated up a burger meant for the boys. She was about to take it to her room when I stopped her.

"Can't you eat with us?" I suggested. "I'm about to serve dinner for everyone."

She agreed reluctantly, and finally—miracle of miracles—we were all five at the table.

"Wow, little sis, you're looking more like a guy every day. Even eating meat! Don't you hate us that much?"

Vicky shot him a death glare but didn't bother responding. She'd gone from aggressive to indifferent.

"It's her diet," I explained. "She needs animal protein sometimes."

She didn't react and kept eating. Then Tony said:

"By the way, my coworker invited us all to lunch tomorrow."

"Who?" Victor asked.

"Irnma. The woman who started at the shop same time as me."

"Oh, right. The one you speak that language you're learning with, yeah?"

"Yeah. You met her. That day you stopped by the shop, I introduced you."

"Yeah, yeah, the Muslim woman who lives with her brother."

"She lives with her brother?" Vicky asked. "No husband? That's weird…"

"She has one, but he stayed in their country with their daughters. She came to earn money for her daughter's medical expenses. Her brother just came along so she wouldn't be alone in a foreign country."

"What's wrong with her daughter?" Victor asked.

"She's got a rare disease that causes muscle weakness. We all pitched in enough for her to get surgery, and…"

"All of you?"

"Well, yeah, with the money her mom earned here, plus what I contributed, and a big donation from… a benefactor."

"And the surgery fixed her?"

"Not completely. Apparently, the weakness comes from an excess of a protein that forms the sheaths around muscle tissue, and…"

"Wait, wait, I'm lost."

"Look, I don't fully get it either. Point is, there's a gland in the brain that produces that protein, and by reducing its size, they got it to produce less, so she's doing better."

"That was the surgery?"

“Yeah. Cost a fortune, but at least she can stand now.”

“Oh! She couldn’t before?”

“No. She’d been in a wheelchair for years.”

“Isn’t it something from birth?” I asked.

“Well, the disease is from birth. But it started getting worse recently.”

“Is it genetic?”

“I think so. It’s caused by a chromosome both parents have to carry. Even then, none of her sisters have it. She got unlucky, honestly.”

“But the surgery didn’t get her walking?”

“No. Everyone hoped it would, but no dice. At least they stopped the disease’s progress, which is huge.”

“Well, she must be happy, right? How old is she?”

“Probably Angie’s age. She can embroider.”

“I can’t embroider,” Angie said, and we all laughed.

“I mean, I thought she was even younger, but if she can embroider, she must be…”

“At least ten or twelve,” I said.

“Yeah, about that. And yeah, she’s happy. They told her the disease won’t pass to her kids unless the dad has that chromosome too, which is super rare.”

“They told you all this?”

“In general terms. They don’t get the technical stuff or proteins. And even if they did and explained it, I probably wouldn’t understand it in their language. I can speak it, but just for everyday stuff. All the ‘technical’ stuff I looked up myself, researching the disease.”

Vicky finished her burger and got up to head to her room.

“You coming to the lunch tomorrow?” Tony asked before she started up the stairs.

“I don’t eat with sexists,” she declared. “Count me out.”

“How do you know they’re sexists?” I asked.

“Well, duh… A religious Muslim man, from what it sounds like, and his sister with six kids… I don’t see them marching on March 8th.”

“You don’t eat with sexists…” I countered, “but you eat with us every day, and according to you, we’re sexists.”

“‘Cause I have no choice,” she shot back. “Besides, not for long. Once I get into the military academy, you won’t see me again.”

“That’s if you pass the exams. By the way, when are they?”

“After summer. And don’t doubt I’ll pass,” she said firmly and vanished upstairs.

Once she was gone, Tony continued:

“And you, Dad? You on duty tomorrow?”

“Not exactly, but…”

“But what?”

“Well, I don’t know if I’ll feel comfortable with those people, to be honest.”

“Why not?”

“‘Cause I don’t speak their language, and they don’t speak mine, right? Meeting them once and shaking hands like I did back then, fine. But more than that… I dunno…”

Checkmate

That was going to be the last afternoon he'd spend with them, and they asked him to at least share one final day together. Irnma organized a farewell lunch, which, once again, none of us attended.

Victor didn't want to go. He wasn't keen on needing Tony as a constant translator, so I, who really wanted to meet them, stayed back to avoid making things awkward for everyone else.

Since that successful surgery, the girl's medical expenses had dropped—though not disappeared, as she still needed maintenance meds—and they'd been away from their homeland and family for too long. They figured they could cover those costs from their country, even if it meant economic hardship.

Tony thought about getting them a gift and asked for my advice, but I wasn't sure what to suggest. They were so different from us, I didn't know what would suit them.

We considered a dress for the girl but didn't know her size, so we thought a necklace would be better. Nothing too flashy, since money was their biggest need. But at least it'd be a memento of their time in our country.

The lunch was simple but well-made and hearty, as always. After eating, they smoked a hookah, and Tony agreed to a chess game with Mushir. While his sister finished clearing the table and they set up the board, the boy asked:

"Hey, Irnma, I didn't quite get what you said the other day. If I heard right, you said your mom guided you here."

"Yes, that's right."

"But didn't you say another time that she died years ago?"

"Those two things aren't incompatible, son," Mushir added.

They both looked at him with calm expressions, as if waiting for him to ask more. Tony continued:

"It's just, that's one of the questions I've always wanted to ask but keep forgetting. Why'd you pick our city, of all places, to come to the West? Did you know someone here?"

"No. We didn't know anyone. Like I said, my mother told me," Irnma went on. "When we got off the plane, we were on a bus heading here, and I saw the shop from the window. She told me, 'That's the place.' That same day, I applied to work there."

"But I don't get it…"

"Tony," Mushir cut in, seeing the boy was increasingly lost, "the women in my family have a gift. Almost all of them, to some degree, have premonitions. And every three generations, through the maternal line, a woman develops the ability to communicate with 'the other side.'"

"You mean, they talk to the dead?"

"No. They talk to the living."

Tony raised his eyebrows. Mushir continued:

"Muslims, and I think Christians too, don't believe in death. What you call 'death' is just a transition from one life to another. Understand?"

“Yeah, yeah, I get it, but…”

“My mother told me in a dream the name of this city, so we came here,” the woman clarified. “‘A man will provide the money your daughter needs.’ That man is you, my son.”

Tony’s jaw dropped, and Mushir paused setting up the chess pieces to add:

“Of course, those on the other side aren’t always friendly. Sometimes they’re demons pretending to be loved ones, giving bad advice. But what did we have to lose? No place is better than another if you don’t know any.”

“We can’t talk to ‘them.’ That’s forbidden,” Irnma insisted, as her brother finished placing the pieces. He said:

“I told you I went to war when I was young, right?”

“Yeah, Mushir. You’ve told me lots of times.”

“The Bakhtiari people value courage as a great virtue, and I wanted to volunteer for a very risky mission. Where there’s the most danger, that’s where we go.”

“I know.”

“Well, I was on my way to offer myself to my captain when, turning a corner, I saw her.”

“Your mother?”

The man nodded.

“I saw her clearly, son, like I’m seeing you now. She’d passed two years earlier, but there she was. She said, ‘Don’t go.’”

“That’s what she said?”

“Clear as day. I hesitated but listened to her. And you know what happened?”

“What, Mushir?”

“The truck carrying my comrades to the mission blew up before reaching its destination. They were betrayed by a deserter.”

“Wow…”

Tony was stunned, almost expecting the Sufi to burst into his usual booming laugh, given his love for fables. But he didn’t. His sister added:

“One of my granddaughters will be able to appear to the living… when she passes to the ‘other side.’ It’s always been that way. The women among these generation, at most, get premonitions. That’s how it is, how Allah ordained it… every three generations.”

“Your move with the whites.”

“What?”

“Come on!” Mushir urged. “The game!” Now he let out his signature laugh, and Tony moved his first pawn, still reeling from everything he’d heard.

They continued the game as if the previous conversation hadn’t happened. They didn’t bring it up again.

“Did you know chess is a Persian invention?”

“Really? Isn’t it Russian?”

The man roared with laughter, as he did every time his opponent lost a piece.

“No, it’s ours. Persian. Well, chess evolved from the Persian game *shatranj*, which came from an even older game, *chaturanga*, played in India in the 6th century.”

“Wow!”

“The Russians got famous in the 20th century as great players, so people think they invented it.”

The man’s wisdom was incredible. In theory, back in his country, he lived in a goat herding village with electricity only from gas generators. He’d never been to school, though in his youth he’d served in the army during a war with a neighboring country. There he learned to read, recite the Quran, and when he was wounded in combat, he spent a long time in a hospital, studying his nation’s history. Over time, he became a Sufi, a kind of Muslim holy man, and now he was his tribe’s spiritual and patriarchal leader.

He loved philosophical talks and often shared admonitions with anyone willing to listen.

“Life’s a river winding downstream, Tony. In spring, the river’s strong, impetuous, and flows joyfully down the slopes. In summer, it loses strength, and in autumn, it dies. With winter rains, it regains some life, and it resurrects with the snowmelt.”

“Yes, Mushir.”

“What season are you in, Tony?”

“Spring, Mushir. It’s spring.”

The man let out one of his booming laughs.

“I mean, what season of *your life* are you in.” The boy still wasn’t fluent in the language, and these misunderstandings happened, especially since the Sufi always spoke figuratively.

“Yeah, I think I’m in spring too.”

“No, my son. You’re in autumn. You should be in spring, no doubt. But you were born straight into autumn. And worse, you’ll stay in that season for the rest of your life.”

“Why, Mushir?”

“Because you live like an old man. That’s why.”

“I don’t get it.”

“You live like an old man. That’s why.”

“I heard you. I don’t get the logic.”

The man let out another loud laugh and patted the boy’s back.

“Now you’ve got me in CHECK. Nice move!” He moved a pawn and said:

“Now I put you in check. Check!” he shouted.

Tony looked at the board—it was true. His king was cornered. He moved another pawn to cover it.

“You live like an old man, Tony! In the morning, you get up, go to work, come back, watch screens for a bit, then go to bed. Every day. You never make love, and you play chess with an old man. Don’t you see, son?”

“Yes, Mushir.”

“Checkmate.”

Expropriation

By this edict, the Catholic religion is hereby outlawed and proscribed, as the deadline given in Decree 1989 of the V Feminist Legislature has expired without satisfactory receipt of the required rectifications mentioned therein.

To this effect, the Catholic Church, a patriarchal institution, contrary to freedom, reactionary, xenophobic, exclusionary, sexist, homophobic, and which hates and discriminates against women in its internal functioning, is therefore dissolved, and its current members, supporters, and proselytes must refrain from professing, following, or publicly defending its reactionary and backward principles that violate human rights.

Additionally, all premises, buildings, lands, or any real estate owned by the Church are expropriated and will automatically become property of the State, which will dedicate them to activities of training, awareness, promotion, and dissemination of the feminist and egalitarian ideals on which the nation is founded.

Violators of this provision will be pursued, tried, and imprisoned for participating directly or indirectly in the crime classified as a hate crime, as established in Decree 25 of the I Feminist Legislature.

A sovereign people democratically elected cannot tolerate in any way the violation of the fundamental rights possessed by all people, and therefore, based on the authority conferred by universal suffrage on this Government, this Decree is hereby elevated to the rank of Law.

Let the law be fulfilled.

Edict signed by Farse Axtan, executive vice president of the free, parity-based, egalitarian, and democratic government of the nation.

"Parity-based and egalitarian? How do they have the nerve? Where's the parity besides in the workshops?" Ivan objected.

The guys at the shop were stunned reading the news. Everyone thought it was just Elle's bluff, and it wouldn't happen. But there it was, right in front of them.

"And by the way, all the churches go to the Inquisition. You read that?"

"Yeah, clearly. *Activities for training, awareness, promotion, and dissemination of feminist ideals.*"

"Meaning reeducation centers for rebellious women," Frank noted.

"What they call 'reformatories,' basically."

"Look how they justify the hate crime, in the preamble:

'Christians, like Muslims or Jews, are guilty of committing hate crimes. They hate homosexuals because they don't penetrate women, and they hate lesbians and independent women because they don't submit to husbands or let themselves be penetrated. These religion groups are morally guilty of many rapes. They force homosexuals to rape. They rape lesbians.'"

"They gonna shut down mosques and synagogues too?"

"Apparently not, but I wouldn't count on it," Tony said.

"Take heed of your neighbor's misfortune."

"Yup. If I had a mosque or synagogue, I'd put it up for sale, now."

“Prices are gonna tank.”

“Even if they do. Better get some money now than get expropriated outright.”

Angela

“Hey, Angela, I’ve always wanted to ask you this, and I think… it’s about time. We spend all day together, and, well, we should know a bit more about each other.”

They’d stopped at a café for breakfast. Their shift had started super early, and they’d already chased two speeders who blew through a checkpoint. They were filing the report, waiting for the patrol car, handing over the detainees at the station, and the morning had flown by.

“Come on, shoot. Let me guess where you’re going.”

“Well, yeah, I’m going there,” Victor said with a big grin.

“Look, Khaki. Let me explain so you get it.” She put her hands on her hips. “Uncastrated males, especially you older ones, are obsessed with pigeonholing people by looks. Like, if a woman wears tight clothes, shows off her breasts, doesn’t have short hair, her uniform fits snug, and she hates punks, then she must be one of those women. Right? Huh?”

“Well, I…”

“Yeah, she must be, and maybe, just maybe, the fascist macho in front of her, being a natural seducer, might one day hit on her and cheat on his devoted wife, who waits patiently at home every day with his slippers and newspaper, ready to give him a blowjob as soon as he walks in. Right? And that day, since the macho comes home drained, he’ll treat her indifferently, and his devoted wife’ll say something like, ‘Khaki, sweetie, don’t you wanna penetrate me today? No? Not even a little blowjob?’ And then the macho’ll say: ‘Nah, honey. Not today. I already unloaded my base animal instincts on another female who put herself in my path… on the road. Another day, maybe I’ll penetrate you and you can blow me like only you know how.’”

Victor was speechless, not knowing where to hide.

“Look, Angela, you didn’t have to be so sarcastic. I just wanted to know if… well, actually, it doesn’t matter to me if you…”

“Well, if it doesn’t matter, better shut up and not try to find out anything. Got it? I don’t ask you, and I don’t care if your wife blows you or not, or if you penetrate her from the front or back or side, or how often. We good?”

“We’re good, Angela,” he swallowed hard.

The woman finished her coffee and said:

“Come on, let’s go. It’s getting late, and we still gotta hit several checkpoints.”

A Private Conversation

“I thought it was gonna be a night full of vibes. You know, kisses, caresses, some spicy stuff... But I was wrong. That lesbian acted like a dude, like, straight-up dude behavior.”

“But what exactly did she do to you?”

“Well, you can probably guess. She grabbed my breasts hard... She even tried to use a freaking rubber dick on me!”

“No way, seriously?”

“Yup, you heard me. And here I was thinking, since she’s a lesbian, she’d know how to please a woman... What a letdown!”

“Vicky, I’m starting to think that, despite everything we’ve been told, lesbians are kinda like guys. Like, guys in women’s bodies. They think and act like them.”

“That’s what I’m starting to believe. The only option would be to try it... with a real woman. Mary, if you’re down, we could give it a shot. I mean, it’s basically the same thing we do on our own. Why not?”

“Maybe not all lesbians are like that. Maybe that one was, like, bisexual or something... I don’t know! You know there’s, like, a million different sexual orientations out there.”

“Yeah, I know. And they can even change in the same person. It’s like it comes and goes.”

“Yup, but we’ve been told to watch out for the ones who are too masculine. Some gay guys turn into lesbians, but deep down, they’re just straight dudes in disguise.”

“What the hell, girl! That’s impossible! If they’re not castrated, at the end of the day, they’re like guys. They just don’t care about our vaginas. They’re only into their own butts.”

“Haha! Yeah, I know. That’s why Elle respects them. For us, pure gay guys are harmless.”

“Exactly. Don’t trust the gays who turn into lesbians. Where there’s no dick, there’s no danger.”

“Unless they strap on a rubber one, haha.”

“Haha! Hey, Mary, my parents won’t be home tomorrow afternoon. They’re taking my sister to some school meeting. If you want, come over, and we can try it. Just you and me, two real women. I’m sure we’d take it to the next level.”

“I don’t know, girl. I’m still kinda...”

“Don’t give me that stupid Christian girl modesty crap! Okay? I’m over that phase, damn it, and I’ve freed myself. It’s about enjoying our bodies. Right?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Exactly. If I’m gonna do this with someone, it’s gotta be you. Tomorrow’s as good a day as any.”

“You sure there won’t be anyone at your place?”

“Nope.”

“What about your brother?”

“He doesn’t get off work ‘til eight. We’ll have the whole afternoon to ourselves.”

I'd gone upstairs to put the ironed clothes in her closet. Vicky wasn't there—probably in the bathroom—and I couldn't resist reading the conversation open on her tablet. I was floored.

If this was the Mary I knew, it was even worse. A church girl, whose parents we were friends with, only 16 years old... If her mom found out...

I was so shocked I didn't know how to react. I left the tablet on the table and turned around... and there was Vicky, arms crossed, with a look that said it all.

"You know it's a crime to read your daughter's messages, right?"

I was speechless. Finally, I swallowed hard and shot back:

"Yeah, I know. You gonna report me?"

The girl didn't answer. Instead, she gave me an angry scowl and stormed over to the table. She hit the button to turn off the screen and stood in front of me, arms crossed, looking like she was sparing my life.

"Vicky, you're not a lesbian. You're a normal woman, like me. If you'd been born in my time..."

"I'd be a woman enslaved to the dick dictatorship, just like you. A sex slave to your husband."

"Hey!"

"Yeah, yeah! Enslaved to the macho man who runs this house!" she shouted, spitting as she spoke.

"You should be ashamed, talking about your father like that. But shame's something you clearly don't have."

She looked at me with such arrogance and hatred it gave me chills. After a few seconds of shooting daggers with her eyes, she said, just as arrogantly:

"You're saying what you read is shameful? Seriously?"

I sighed. I didn't have the energy or the strength to fight her. She was stronger than me, and I'd come out burned.

"I'm just saying you're on the wrong path. You'll never find the pleasure you're looking for with other women."

"And what the hell do you know!" she snapped, stepping toward me aggressively. "What do you know about what I feel or what I'm capable of feeling, huh?"

I felt like crying. Her arrogance was something I'd never seen before. A 17-year-old woman—almost 18—bigger than me, ready to slap me if I pushed her buttons. Yeah, she would've done it. I'm sure of it.

"I'm just saying you're going the wrong way. You should find a man who'll love you, and..."

"You know it's a crime to try to change your daughter's sexual orientation, right?"

"Yeah, I know. By the way, only in one direction, not the other."

"Exactly. It's a hate crime against the gay and lesbian community."

"Fine. You gonna call the Inquisition to lock me up in some reeducation center?"

"They don't lock women up for that."

"I know. But they force them into sessions and workshops. They could even take you away from me. Is that what you want, Vicky? To go to a foster home?"

"You're a lawyer, Olivia. Unbelievable." She never called me "Mom" when she was pissed.

"Yeah, I'm a lawyer, and a judicial assistant to boot."

"Well, it's unbelievable," she said, glaring at me with hatred. "I'm over 16, and in that case, *you'd* be the one who'd have to go."

"Oh, no, smartass!" I snapped, losing my cool. "They couldn't kick me out of my own house because I've got another daughter who needs me. They'd make *you* go. They'd send you to one of those lesbian centers you love so much, and you'd end up with a rubber dick between your legs every day."

Vicky clenched her teeth in rage... she looked like she was about to bite me. But I didn't care. I kept going:

"And by the way, that's not a crime. Actual penetration is, but using those things isn't, because there's no man involved. You'd deserve it."

She couldn't hold back anymore:

"Get out of my room *now*!" she shoved me, her eyes burning with fury.

"Yeah, I'm going," I said, catching my breath. If I hadn't held back, I would've pushed her back, and she definitely would've slapped me.

"By the way," I added, "I'm not going anywhere tomorrow. They postponed Angie's meeting. You'll have to find somewhere else to do..."

"To do *what*?"

To do the dirty stuff you were planning, I almost said. But I held back. I just turned and left, still reeling in disbelief.

A Clandestine Mass

That Thursday, I was fed up with crying alone in my room. It was inevitable after the blow I'd taken. Vicky stormed out of the house minutes later and didn't come back until late at night. God knows who she was with.

I didn't tell anyone, not even Victor, even though I desperately needed to tell someone to ease my inner turmoil.

Yeah, nowadays it was totally normal. As normal as it was in my youth for all guys and girls to sleep around. But just like my mom probably didn't want to know if I was sleeping with anyone and assumed I wasn't, I had blinders on that kept me from seeing the harsh reality.

Yeah, I already suspected something—moms aren't dumb. But suspecting is one thing; having your suspicions confirmed is another.

Besides realizing my daughter was practicing lesbianism—she'd slept with a lesbian and planned to with her best friend (without being a lesbian, which was the worst part)—what hurt as much or more was how she treated me. The arrogance, the haughtiness, the nerve…

We'd always gotten along badly. But from that day on… things only got worse. I'd completely lost her, and that was maybe the biggest pain of all.

We'd missed several Sundays of mass, and I needed spiritual comfort. The police had been stalking us, and we had to cancel some services right before they started. Until, finally, we found a place to celebrate the Eucharist.

It was in an abandoned industrial warehouse on the city outskirts, where chemicals had been made in the past. Before, we'd been in another nearby factory, a bottling plant, until a tip led the Inquisition to seal it and jail the owner. He was a parishioner like us, who'd made the huge mistake of not putting the factory in his wife's name. If he had, she would've had it sealed, but he wouldn't have gone to prison, though she'd have had to attend reeducation sessions.

We all knew each other and were part of a group where we communicated via coded messages hidden in millions of lines of code, specifying the coordinates and time of the service. Services happened every Sunday in a different spot. Sometimes even outdoors, at night, in the middle of nowhere, with no one around for miles. And even then, the Inquisition lurked and jailed organizers.

Among bottles or, like now, rusty irons, we experienced the transformation of bread and wine into Christ's body and blood much more intensely.

Before, when we risked nothing, when we went to mass like going to a theater show, we didn't appreciate it fully. But now, we savored every phrase, every reading, every prayer as something unique, which it always should've been. Especially because we never knew if that Sunday would be the last. Because we never knew if police would be waiting outside to haul our husbands to jail, us to reeducation centers, and take our daughters for being a bad influence. For passing on "hate" toward "vulnerable groups." Groups that stopped being vulnerable a long, long time ago. In fact, we were the vulnerable ones now, and no one jailed those who hated us.

Since the ban took effect, I'd told Victor not to come. But tell him not to do something, and he'd do it just to spite you—he was rebellious by nature and always came with me.

Who did listen to her husband that day was Doña Lupe, the wife of our Mexican friends.

“Your husband didn’t come?” I asked.

“No. It’s too dangerous. You know.”

Yeah, I knew. We all did. In fact, of the fourteen or fifteen people gathered that day, only three were men.

“And Mary?”

“My daughter’s not feeling well,” she replied, looking away.

Weird, I thought. That girl always came with her parents. But of course, she probably couldn’t handle seeing me and would’ve died of embarrassment. If I’d told her mom, right there in front of her, that her daughter and mine planned a sexual encounter… God knows what Doña Guadalupe would’ve done. It would’ve given her a shock, a fit, a faint, and she’d need assisted breathing for sure.

So I said nothing, though I kept glancing at the priest during the whole service, thinking about everything I’d read on that tablet. ‘Cause no matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t shake the hypothetical image of my daughter and hers naked on the bed doing… all that stuff they imagine. By the way, and who knows who that lesbian Vicky had slept with before was.

Anyway, I tried to focus on what was happening at mass, and just as Father David was finishing the Consecration and we were all kneeling, a sharp whistle made us jump up immediately. Sure enough, the lookout at the door had spotted something unusual nearby, and it was nothing but the police.

Yeah. Some tip, some leak, or even drone or satellite detection of unusual people flow in a place where no one should be at that time.

It happened just like the day Victor went after the punks. The same scene repeated in a similar setting. An abandoned industrial warehouse and two pairs of guards: two eunuchs, a woman, and an older cop. The last one was a buddy of Khaki’s from his riot squad days. The only difference was the four cops weren’t from traffic and had come in two patrol cars. Basically, the same scene, but roles reversed: now *we* were the criminals.

First thing Father David did was take off his stole and toss it with the missal into a big vat of expired chemicals. They’d hardly go digging in there, and both would probably dissolve soon in that mess.

But the problem was the hosts and chalice, already consecrated. They were truly Christ’s body and blood, and had to be treated as such. But the guards were already entering the warehouse, and the priest had no choice but to drink the wine immediately so it wouldn’t spill and hide the two cups, trying to camouflage them among a machine’s gears.

“What are you doing here?” the woman cop asked.

“Officer,” Victor stepped up, “we’re a group of investors here to check out this warehouse —we’re planning to buy it from the city hall.”

There was a silence where we all held our breath. Clearly, they didn’t buy it much, and one eunuch started checking the area. The father positioned himself right in front of the machine where he’d hidden the hosts, so no one would notice a spot where something could be stashed.

“We’re gonna scan your IDs. Please, show your wrists.”

“Why?” Victor asked. “You can’t without reasonable suspicion we’re committing a crime.”

“We do, smartass sexist,” the woman snapped, getting close with gritted teeth.

“You don’t believe me? I warn you, your superiors might not like what you’re doing. The city hall needs funds, and selling this warehouse would help their empty coffers. We might rethink our decision because of this.”

The woman backed off a bit and added:

“Scanning IDs is routine. Please, show your wrists.”

One eunuch started passing a proximity reader over the first parishioners’ skin. The subdermal chip with each of our IDs would dump the data, stored on the police server.

“Here! Here it is!” the other eunuch shouted, the one checking around. “I found the chalice!”

“Run!” the priest yelled. “Run as fast as you can!”

Victor shoved the woman cop to the ground, and both he and I stepped over her toward a back door, the closest to where we’d left our motorcycle. The others headed for the main door, knocking over the eunuchs the same way. The industrial warehouse was full of pipes and tanks, making it hard to shoot without hitting obstacles—that’s what saved us. As soon as she got up, the woman tried coming after us, but the older cop stopped her.

“Let ‘em go! I’ll get them. You, help the others.”

She obeyed and headed to the exit, where some had already escaped. Meanwhile, Victor and I were already outside and on the bike, and that’s when the guard caught up—the one Khaki knew.

The man did nothing to stop our escape. Instead, the two men saluted with hands to their foreheads, and he said:

“You scratch my back, I'll scratch yours.”

“Thanks, buddy!” the boss shouted as the Harley broke the zero-to-sixty acceleration record. With a deafening roar, in seconds we were out of anyone’s reach.

We got away by the skin of our teeth that time. But some parishioners were caught, not to mention those already ID’d. We were fewer and fewer…

A Bombshell Woman

“That chick was hot,” Ivan said about a client who’d just picked up her car.

“Who? The one with the blue SUV?” Tony asked.

“Yeah, man, what tits she had… You didn’t notice?”

“Nah. I was working on that bike and didn’t see.”

“Who’re you talking about?” Frank asked. It was almost quitting time, and they were in the pits, putting away tools.

“A smoking hot chick who just left.”

“Yeah, the blue SUV one, right?”

“Yeah. You saw her too?”

“How could I not? She practically shoved her tits in my face.”

“Come on, Frank, don’t hallucinate. You wish a chick shoved her tits in your face,” Tony said, grinning.

“Man, she did! They were… this big!” He held his arms out front and cupped his hands like grabbing them.

“She must not be very feminist. Otherwise, she’d have gotten them reduced.”

“For sure,” Ivan agreed. “Man, before they got them enlarged, now they get them shrunk.”

“It’s crazy how manipulable women are. A century ago, they were convinced they had to marry and have kids by 25 or they were old maids and got depressed. Then they told them the opposite, and depression hit when they *got* pregnant.”

“You said it, Tony. And same with sexual preferences now. They’ve convinced them it’s cool to do it with women, and now they’re all lesbians. They’re at the mercy of fate. Just like before, a busty woman was proud of her tits and did everything to show them off even more.”

“And especially,” Frank added, “to make other women green with envy.”

“Exactly. And now, look what happens. No one wants theirs to show.”

“That’s how they are. Totally fickle, moldable, changeable. Which doesn’t happen with us.”

“Exactly. We’re always thinking about the same thing, so we can’t get that chick’s tits out of our heads.”

The three laughed and headed to the locker rooms to change out of their overalls. Ivan couldn’t get the woman out of his head and kept going.

“For sure, that woman wasn’t a feminazi. They’re all ugly. I don’t know how terrorists can bang those trolls. They’re their prime target, I think.”

“Watch it. Just ‘cause they wear t-shirts and baggy pants and have short hair doesn’t mean they’re ugly,” Tony objected. “Some have killer bodies.”

“And how do you know? You been with one?”

“Obviously not.”

“No, duh, that’s impossible,” Frank added. “No one in their right mind would go with a real man… I mean, uncastrated.”

“Well, they’re not in their right mind.”

“They’re not in their right mind, but for that? Sure.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Ivan went on. “So how do you know some feminazis aren’t ugly? They all seem so to me.

“Well, looking ugly and being ugly are two different things. Dress one of them with a bikini and long hair, and you’ll see. Take my sister, for example. She’s a complete feminazi, but… she’s actually really pretty.

“I haven’t seen her in a while,” Frank added.

“You probably haven’t seen her much. She’s only been around here a few times.”

“Yeah, I remember,” said Ivan. “I remember her clearly. Short hair, right? Doesn’t look much like you.”

“Nope. Except for the hair color, she looks like my mom. I take after my dad. Well, except for the hair color too. Personality-wise, it’s the other way around.”

“That’s interesting!”

“Yeah, she’s a lot like him. She’s actually joining the military academy… She’s got the entrance tests tomorrow.”

“Seriously?”

“Yep. My dad tried to get me into guns and all that, but I wasn’t into it. Vicky was the one who followed in his footsteps. They go to the shooting range together.”

“That’s where cops practice, right?” Frank asked.

“Yeah. You’ve probably seen it in videos. They’ve got those human-shaped targets set up at like 25 or 50 meters.”

“Yeah, masculine silhouettes, right?

“Exactly. Definitely not feminine ones.”

“Bet your sister shoots at the balls,” Ivan said.

“Wouldn’t surprise me…”

“Of course,” he replied. “She totally fits the mold for perfect feminazi and dyke. That’s why she keeps her hair so short, right?

“Pretty much,” Tony confirmed. “I hate to say it, but it’s true. Such a shame. She’s so pretty, good use could have been made of it.”

“Wait, but,” Ivan asked again. “How do you know she’s pretty? Have you seen her naked?

“Well… yeah, a few times.”

“Now, or when she was a child?”

“Both,” he confirmed, and Ivan’s eyes went wide.

“Surprised?” he continued. “We live in the same house, use the same bathroom… It’s normal. She’s seen me too.

Ivan was licking his lips and asked:

“So, how her tits are?”

“You really wanna know?”

“Yes, I’d…”

“Well, you’re gonna be left wondering.”

Roadblock

“Attention all units! Attention! A 341 is heading north on Highway 18. Suspect is a white male, dark shirt, long hair. Driving a red Ford Capsule, considered a Level 5 threat. Proceed with extreme caution!”

“What the hell’s a 341?” Angela asked. The two cops had just filled up at a gas station and were pulling out to continue their patrol.

“Home invasion with possible rape,” Victor replied. “Level 5 means…”

“Yeah, I know. Dude’s super dangerous. Well, that son of a bitch is gonna have to deal with me. Let’s go! We’re right by Highway 18.”

They fired up their BMWs and quickly reached a spot where the road narrowed, perfect for setting up a checkpoint. They positioned their motorcycles to leave just enough room for cars to crawl through, and started inspecting every vehicle.

Since they were close to where the crime went down, it didn’t take long for the suspect to show up. From a distance, they spotted a red Ford Capsule. They exchanged a quick signal—full alert—and moved their bikes closer to block the way. Both stood in front, signaling the car to stop, but instead of slowing down, the driver floored it. The two cops barely dove out of the way in time to avoid getting hit. The car smashed into Victor’s bike, sending it flying, and sped off.

But neither he nor Angela froze. They drew their weapons and opened fire, until a shot hit the driver. The car skidded, veered off the road, and the guy inside, badly wounded, started crawling out.

“Let’s go!” Angela yelled. They were no more than a hundred meters away, but she sprinted like her life depended on it. She got there before Victor and started beating the crap out of the guy, kicking him with a fury he’d never seen:

“You pig! You filthy rapist!”

She was practically foaming at the mouth. Victor had to grab her by the waist and pull her back to stop her from finishing the guy off right there.

“Angela, enough! Can’t you see he’s half-dead already?”

And he was. The guy was dying—the shot had been fatal.

They cleared the road and called for an ambulance. By the time it arrived, the suspect was gone. Victor went to check on his bike, only to find it completely totaled from the crash.

“We’re gonna have to ride back on yours,” he suggested.

“Yeah,” Angela said. “Alright, let’s go.”

She hopped on and started the bike, with Victor climbing on behind her. He grabbed onto her, but she turned and snapped:

“Hey, hey, no touching! You know how you get.”

“But how am I supposed to—”

“Hold onto my waist.”

“Yeah, obviously. Where else?”

“Your hands have a way of wandering up.”

“Why would I do that?”

“‘Cause you’re a chauvinist pig and you’re always horny.”

“Me?”

“Yeah, you. I’ve seen how you stare at women. If it wasn’t for this uniform still carrying some weight, you’d have been reported a dozen times already… Man, all that Christian talk, and you can’t stop ogling. You should be ashamed.”

“Look, I don’t—”

“Just drive, alright?”

Angela got off, and Victor slid forward to take the wheel. She climbed on behind him, and he turned with a smirk:

“Let’s see where *your* hands end up, huh? They might slip down on their own…”

“Yeah, right. Dream on.”

They rode back to the station, where they had to file a report on the incident and answer questions from the judge, since it ended with the suspect’s death. After submitting and signing the paperwork, they hit the cafeteria—they were parched. It was summer, and the heat was brutal. Victor offered to buy Angela a drink.

“Hey, Khaki, sorry about earlier, and especially about the other day. I shouldn’t have talked to you like that.”

“What do you mean?”

“I think I went a bit overboard with you.”

“It’s fine, no big deal.”

“No, you’re right. We’re partners, and we should know more about each other.”

“Well, I don’t wanna force you to—”

“No, I’m not about to spill my sexual preferences or anything.”

“No, I didn’t mean—”

“Besides, whatever they are… damn, you could be my dad.”

“Totally. My son Tony’s only a few years younger than you.”

“Exactly.” She paused. “And that’s why I wanna tell you what happened to my brother.”

Angela took a sip of her soda, sighed, and started talking.

“He had a… bad run-in with some punk girls, and—”

“You two,” a woman interrupted. “Sorry to break it up, but you’re back on duty this afternoon.”

“What?” Victor groaned. “We just got here!”

“Sorry, orders from above. They need roadblocks set up. Another rape case. The perp’s on the run and he’s in the area.”

“But why us?” Angela protested.

“I told you, orders from above. I want you both on your bikes setting up a checkpoint on 16th Street in five minutes. You’ll get the suspect’s description over the radio.”

“I don’t have a bike,” Victor said, trying to weasel out.

“Then take one of the spares. You heard me, right?”

“Yeah, yeah.”

The sergeant walked off, and the two cops chugged their drinks before heading to the garage.

“Another rape case…” Angela muttered. “What’s going on? They stop putting bromide in the meat or what?”

“And of course, it’s us, when we’re already done with our shift.”

“That woman hates us, Khaki.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“I think she wants to split up the teams again.”

“Again? Why?”

“Just to screw with us.”

“Ugh, I don’t wanna switch.”

“You’ve gotten attached to me, huh?” Angela grinned.

“Look, I’d rather have Oscar, not gonna lie.”

“Yeah, but better the devil you know, right?”

“Pretty much,” he smiled.

“Well, if it makes you feel better, I don’t wanna switch either. You’re a chauvinist prick, but you’re *my* chauvinist prick. I’m used to you.”

“I think we make a good team, don’t you?”

“Yeah, maybe. You’re stronger and a way better driver. And me…”

“You’re the decisive one. The way things are these days, if it weren’t for you…”

They gave each other a fist bump, and she said:

“Alright, let’s go. Let’s catch this other son of a bitch.”

They headed out, put on their helmets with a bit of resignation, and started their bikes. They reached 16th Street, where a pair of eunuch cops were already posted. They were supposed to check every vehicle’s occupant, narrowing the road so only one car could pass at a time.

The afternoon was grueling. They arrested several guys who matched the description and hauled them to the station for questioning while their colleagues kept watch on the street. By nightfall, the order came to stand down. The perp had been taken down outside the city by another patrol. Exhausted, the pair returned to the station to wrap up. They’d been going for almost 24 hours straight.

Out of uniform, they stepped outside, and Victor said to Angela:

“If you want, I can walk you home. You live close by…”

“Sure, but don’t expect me to invite you up for a drink, okay? You might get the wrong idea.”

He grinned and said:

“Fair enough, but you gotta finish telling me what happened to your brother.”

Her face darkened, and they started walking toward her place. When she didn’t say anything, he pressed:

“What happened with those punk girls?”

She looked away, swallowed hard, and said:

“They castrated him, Khaki. They castrated him… with a butcher knife.”

“Jesus…”

“They ripped everything off. Not just his balls. If the ambulance hadn’t gotten there in time, he would’ve bled out.”

“Those bitches…” Victor muttered. “How’d it happen?”

“A group of them cornered him when he was coming home from work. He was about to walk into my place when they hit him with a taser. They gagged him, and then they did it. It all happened fast, in less than a minute.”

“But why?”

“They got the wrong guy.”

“Who’d they mistake him for?”

“A terrorist. Oh, Khaki, you have no idea what those women are capable of!”

“Yeah, I do. The ones from the other day…”

“Those were just wannabe kids. Practically harmless. But there’s others, like some kind of vigilante group, taking justice into their own hands, hunting down culprits. And if they don’t find one, they make the first guy they see pay. With help from some eunuchs, of course.”

“But why’d they think your brother was a rapist?”

“That’s what I’m saying. Someone had to take the fall, and they thought it was him because he was connected to the victim. They’re not so crazy they’d castrate just anyone… though I know they’ve done it before.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Those women got bad info from someone who told them about the victim and mixed things up. They mistook my brother for the rapist when he was the least likely person to do it.”

“And what happened to him? I mean, after…”

“He died a few days later from an infection.”

“Damn, I’m sorry. And I get why you hate those… disgusting women, to put it lightly.”

“I hate them, Khaki, you have no idea how much! As much as or more than I hate men.”

“Men? Why?”

“Because the victim, the woman my brother supposedly raped… was me.”

Rape

In that crazy society where hate had been carefully cultivated, men and women were pitted against each other like never before. Despite Angela's shocking story, when Victor got home, he was hit with even worse news. The rapist they'd been chasing that afternoon, the one they were after, was on the run for raping someone very close to him: his own daughter.

Vicky had been raped.

She came home at noon, in shock, and after failing to reach Victor, I called Tony:

"Son, I can't get ahold of your dad. He must be in a dead zone. Can you come home, please?"

"What's wrong?"

"Just come. It's urgent."

I was as shaken as she was, my legs trembling. These are the kinds of situations where a woman can't be alone. She needs someone close to lean on. I didn't want to tell him over the phone, but this wasn't normal, and he sensed something was off. I'd never called him at work to drop everything and come home urgently.

On his bike, he got there in no time. Even with rush hour traffic clogging the city, motorcycles always beat the lights.

We got into my car—the only one in the house, since both Victor and my son always ride bikes everywhere. I was too rattled to drive, so Tony took the wheel. Vicky was still crying, and when we got to the station, she was still a mess.

"Where did the incident take place?"

I'd hoped to see a familiar face there, but no luck. It'd been a while since I'd shown up at Victor's workplace, and everyone was a stranger. After they took a blood sample and vaginal swabs—a pretty uncomfortable moment, by the way—we started recounting what happened.

The eunuch at the complaints desk was a bit curt, though really, he was just doing his job.

"It was outside the Academy," Vicky said.

"Which academy?"

"The infantry military academy."

"Oh, right."

"I was coming from the admission tests… because I'm going to pursue a military career," she explained, sobbing.

"Go on, please."

"The bus stop was far, so I decided to walk along the road."

"Excuse me, miss, but as far as I know, there's a stop right across from the academy."

"Well, yeah, but not all the city buses go there. They run less often, and I didn't want to wait. There are more frequent buses from the next town over."

"Alright," he finished writing, "and then you say a car pulled over and offered you a ride, correct?"

"Yes, that's right."

“Why did you get in? Did you know any of the occupants?”

“No. But there was a woman in the back seat. That made me trust them.”

“A woman who, apparently, wasn’t a woman.”

“I don’t know if she was or wasn’t,” she sobbed again. “I felt a prick in my arm, and in two or three seconds, I blacked out. All I know is when I woke up, we were in that place, an abandoned house, and two guys were on top of me.”

“Two guys? But you said only one penetrated you.”

“Yeah, I think so. The other one was just watching,” she wiped her nose with a tissue. “Honestly, I don’t know what happened until I woke up. I guess that’s when it started.”

“I understand, miss, you haven’t had the occlusive cyst procedure, correct?”

“No. I’m allergic to the toxin.”

I looked at her in shock. But now wasn’t the time to dig deeper. I’d talk to her later.

“Ma’am,” a woman in a white coat addressed me. “We just got the lab results. Your daughter has traces of Midazolam.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s a short-acting anesthetic used for sedation during medical procedures. Based on the dose we found, she was probably out for no more than fifteen minutes.”

“Yeah, that sounds right,” Vicky said. “That’s about how long it took… maybe a bit longer, until I got back to the road and asked for help.”

“You say the two men fled as soon as they were done?”

“Yes. They started their car and left me there alone.”

“Did you get a look at the license plate?”

“No. I didn’t notice.”

“Officer, my daughter wasn’t in any condition to notice anything,” I pointed out.

“Yes, of course, I understand.”

“Did you put up any resistance? Did they hit you?”

“No. I was still half-asleep.”

“Alright. Now, try to remember. You need to tell me what these two men looked like. Did they say anything? What were they wearing?”

“It was all so blurry. Like I said, I wasn’t fully awake.”

“Please, try.”

“I didn’t know either of them. But their faces were… weird.”

“Weird?”

“I’d say they were wearing… masks. I don’t know… or maybe it just seemed that way.”

“That’s possible,” the officer said. “Midazolam can cause hallucinations.” He finished writing a few lines and continued. “Any details about their clothing you can recall?”

“No. The one who raped me was wearing a black T-shirt. And… I think he grabbed a jacket, same color, when he was done.”

“Any other details about their clothes?”

“White sneakers… the kind with a five-pointed star. Yeah, I think that’s what they were. He tripped when he was leaving, and that’s why I noticed.”

“I assume you didn’t recognize either of them by their voices, correct?”

“Right. They barely spoke.”

“Barely? What did they say?”

“They said… I only caught bits and pieces, but… yeah, I think they said…”

“What?”

“When they undressed me, they looked at my body, and the guy in the black T-shirt said something like, ‘Well, damn, she *is* hot.’ And that it didn’t seem like it.”

“Did he say that exactly?”

“I don’t know exactly. If he didn’t say that, it was something like it. I don’t remember. The other guy nodded, like he was agreeing.”

“Alright, miss. For now, we’re done. You can go. We might have more questions as the investigation progresses.”

“What happens now?” Tony asked. He’d been silent the whole time, sitting behind us.

“For now, we’ll look for the vehicle. Even though we don’t have a detailed description, the make and color are a start.”

We got up and headed to our car. Vicky seemed to be doing better. It was like filing the report and knowing they were going after the rapist had calmed her down a bit. When we got in, Tony went to start the car but stopped. Then he said to me:

“Mom, can you drive?”

“Why?”

“I’m staying. I think I know who did this to Vicky.”

Capture

The suspect didn’t go down easy. His car had been identified by the victim, and thanks to the person who turned him in, they knew who he was. His photo was in the hands of every cop at every roadblock set up across the state.

Within hours of the crime, he was spotted, arrested, and thrown behind bars, awaiting questioning and DNA tests the next day to confirm if it was really him.

But like I said, he didn’t make it easy. He took out several officers trying to stop him at the first roadblock. Two even ended up in the hospital from the crash with his fleeing car—a car, by the way, that was never seen again.

It was hours later when the suspect tried to enter the city in a different vehicle, his own this time. Despite the switch, the cops recognized him and arrested him on the spot.

It was a big deal, and the media went all out, as they always do in cases like this. Without naming the victim or the informant, his face was plastered everywhere, and the entire state and beyond was fixated on the guy.

When he got to the station, he kept thrashing and screaming like a lunatic:

“It wasn’t me!” he shouted. “You’ve got the wrong guy! It wasn’t me!”

It didn’t matter. The eunuchs and women there attacked him, insulted him… they nearly lynched him right there, until he was beaten, bloodied, and thrown into one of the most isolated, grimy, damp cells in the basement.

But that wasn’t the worst part.

The worst came at midnight. The prisoner had been screaming all afternoon like a madman: “Get me out of here! It wasn’t me! Get me out!” No one listened. No one brought him food, not even a glass of water. The toilet was clogged and stinking, and the sink had no water.

Finally, someone entered his cell. He was half-asleep, exhausted from the ordeal.

But they didn’t come to bring him anything—except death.

First, they hit him with a taser. As he writhed in pain, they stripped him from the waist down. Then, brutally and cold-bloodedly, they castrated him with a butcher knife. They tore off his genitals and left him there, writhing in agony, screaming.

“It wasn’t me!” he cried. “Why did you do this to me?” he whimpered, already dying. “It wasn’t me! Oh, God…”

His screams didn’t last long. A massive pool of blood confirmed his death. While the wound from castration alone isn’t always fatal, in the struggle, they’d also severed the femoral vein in his groin, and that’s lethal.

Of course, no one saw anything, no one heard anything, no one reported what happened. Officially, it was a suicide, but something that gruesome couldn’t be hushed up so easily, at least not within the police force. Though it never left those walls, every cop found out, including Victor, who told us about it—though not right away. He kept it to himself and only spilled it weeks later.

Consolation

Tony needed some affection that day. Even if it was the flawed, self-serving affection of Judith, he needed to find comfort in the arms and chest of a woman who wasn't his mother.

Honestly, I didn't think it would hit him so hard. He and his sister didn't even get along that well! But that's how it was. Two weeks had passed since the incident, and you could almost say he was taking it worse than Vicky.

"See? This is what happens when you don't castrate people. If everyone was castrated, this wouldn't happen. Your sister wouldn't have been raped, and we'd all—men and women—live in a world of peace and harmony."

Judith welcomed him in a special way. Instead of greeting him as usual, in the most exquisite and provocative lingerie, she wore an elegant, expensive high-fashion dress. She'd set up a stunning table with the finest dishes. The bossa nova music was replaced by a soft romantic melody alternating saxophone and piano; the lighting was dimmed, and the table was adorned with candelabras holding red candles near each of their seats.

"Do you like Kobe beef, Tony?"

"Yeah," he replied curtly, chewing a piece of steak.

"This is top-quality Japanese Kobe, from the Wagyu breed."

Judith watched him eat with a kind of smug satisfaction, barely touching her own food. She gazed at him like someone admiring a priceless painting bought at a steal in an auction.

"These cattle," she went on, "don't drink water—they're given beer. That's what makes the meat so tender, with just the right marbling. They're raised with classical music to keep them calm, and they get daily massages to achieve that perfection. Isn't it exquisite?"

"Must've cost you a fortune," he said, mouth full.

"Pfft, money! Who cares? Money's for spending!"

"Yeah, sure."

They finished dinner and toasted with the most expensive French champagne. He wasn't in the mood, but he went along with it.

"Come on, Tony… take me to the seventh heaven again. I've been craving it for so long… Why'd you take so long to come back? I don't know how I survived without your touch…" she confessed. "I thought I'd die without your caresses!"

He took her hand, leading her out of the dining area, then scooped her up in his arms and carried her to the usual chaise lounge. He started the usual ritual, slowly undressing her while kissing and caressing her all over, giving her those little nibbles on her neck and shoulders that drove her wild with pleasure.

He put in the effort, as always, and just as she was about to hit that seventh heaven, her lover stopped.

"What the…?"

Hands that weren't Judith's touched his neck, and there, behind him, was a man.

"Who's this?" Tony stood up, and she followed.

"This is Nacho. I brought him just for you. You can penetrate him, and he'll do whatever you want."

Tony looked back and forth between them, unsure whether to laugh or cry. In the end, he went for the easiest option. He grabbed his shirt from a nearby piece of furniture, put it on, and stormed toward the door.

“Tony! No!”

“I’m out!”

“No! Don’t go! Please!”

All her pleas were useless. Judith ran after him, grabbing at him to stop him, but she couldn’t keep him from leaving.

“I’ll do whatever you want!” she begged. “Whatever you want! You hear me?” She was almost in tears. “I’ll do anything!”

“Too late,” he said, pulling away and slamming the door behind him.

Judith stood frozen for a few seconds, staring at the closed door, dazed. Then, with the same speed she’d rushed to it, she turned to the eunuch.

“You idiot!” she screamed, slapping him so hard it split his lip. “You ruined everything!”

“But… I only did what you told me to…” he said, trying to cover the wound and wipe the blood.

“Get out of my sight! I never want to see you again!”

Reflections

Three months had passed since Vicky's rape and the murder of Tony's colleague that night.

Honestly, we were all still pretty shaken, except, ironically, the victim herself.

"Mom, I don't know if I did the right thing by turning Ivan in."

Victor had already told us what they did to that mechanic. We'd always thought he just killed himself.

"Son, you did what you had to do."

"If I'd known they were gonna do *that* to him…"

"You wouldn't have reported him?"

"I don't think so," he sighed. "Damn, look at Vicky! Yeah, she was a wreck at first, totally devastated… but now? Does she seem normal to you? She's acting like nothing happened!"

"Your sister's tough, Tony. If that had happened to me, I don't know if I'd have bounced back. But her… well, you see how she is."

"Yeah, he raped my sister—raped a colleague's sister! That's unforgivable… but what they did to him… I don't know. It was too much. No one deserves to die like that, no matter how bad their crime."

"Yeah. It's the law of an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth."

"No, Mom. That law would've applied if Vicky had died. *That's* an eye for an eye. Even then, damn it, we're not… or we shouldn't be animals. We're supposed to be civilized."

"Supposed to be."

"But the worst part is seeing her like this… Partying all day yesterday, posting like crazy on her socials… Does that seem normal to you?"

"I guess she's dealing with it in her own way, Tony."

"She's dealing with it *deep* down, then," he shot back. "And the worst part is, I'm not even sure it was Ivan."

"What?"

"I think I let my anger get the better of me. I felt betrayed by a colleague, seeing my sister crying… and above all, I felt guilty for telling him the day before that Vicky wasn't as unsexy as she seemed. I felt like it was my fault she got raped!"

"No one raped Vicky because of you, son. A brother hyping up his sister doesn't mean she's gonna get raped right after. Get that out of your head, because you're wrong."

"Yeah, but I can't stop thinking about it, damn it. I'm more messed up than she is!"

I hugged him and gave him a kiss. He was almost in tears.

"But are you really not sure it was him?"

"Look, there were a lot of coincidences. Ivan was bitter toward women because his dad's life was ruined by a false accusation. Yeah, we're all bitter in some way, given how things are. But him, definitely more so."

"Right."

“Plus, he knew Vicky was going to the military academy for her admission tests that morning. I told him myself. And it happened on a day he didn’t show up to work. Those white sneakers with the five-pointed star? He wears those all the time. And then that line, ‘Well, damn, she *is* hot.’ That’s what sealed it for me. It’s like they wanted to see for themselves what I said! Doesn’t that all seem like too much of a coincidence?”

“Yeah, it does. But he should’ve had a fair trial. A trial with solid evidence, not just assumptions. At the very least, they should’ve heard his side and checked his alibi. They didn’t even get to test his DNA to see if the semen was his.”

“They didn’t have time, damn it. They killed him first!” A tear rolled down his cheek.

“Tony,” I said, comforting him, holding his arm and pulling him close. “Whether it was him or not, there’s no fixing it now.”

“That’s the worst part, Mom! Don’t you get it? Vicky’s healed from what happened to her. Just look at her! Damn it, and my colleague’s dead! He died a horrible death!”

“Why do you think now it might not have been him?”

“I keep turning it over in my head, Mom, and I can’t stop thinking about it.”

“Yeah, it’s a lot of coincidences, for sure. Like, did you ever find out why he didn’t go to work that day? Did he call in?”

“Yeah, he called. I didn’t know until the next day, obviously. He called first thing in the morning, saying he was sick. Dad confirmed it. His colleagues said that’s the first thing he said when they arrested him—that he was going to the doctor. Of course, it could’ve all been a setup.”

“If he was driving, he couldn’t have been *that* sick.”

“He had a cold. I remembered that later.”

“So it might’ve been true… Maybe he got worse that day and that’s why he didn’t show up. Right?”

“Yeah. But you can still rape someone with a cold, Mom.”

“Depends on how bad he was feeling, I guess.”

“Exactly. But we’ll never know. What’s weird is they caught him coming *into* the city, not fleeing. Doesn’t that seem odd?”

“Maybe he felt cornered and went with that doctor strategy. He knew they’d catch him eventually, so…”

“Yeah, could be. But the car Vicky saw wasn’t his.”

“Well, that’s not a big deal. It could’ve been rented, or maybe it was the accomplice’s.”

“Yeah, but that car still hasn’t been found.”

“Of course, because they didn’t look for it. They already had their culprit, so why bother tying up loose ends? That’s how the laws work in this country. I see it every day at the courthouse.”

“Yeah, they found their culprit. A culprit who was judged and executed the same day, while the real one might still be out there.”

I nodded. He was absolutely right.

“And,” he went on, “those white sneakers with the star? Tons of people have those. I’ve had a pair myself!”

“Yeah, but it’s another coincidence.”

“And the other guy with him couldn’t have been Frank, who was also part of that conversation at the shop the day before. Remember the other guy said, ‘Yeah, she *is* hot’? Frank was with me at work when it happened.”

“That just means Ivan, or whoever it was, must’ve told his accomplice that Vicky wasn’t as unsexy as she seemed.”

“Right. And how’d he know that if it wasn’t Ivan? *I’m* the one who told him! Damn it, I told him my sister was hot!” He slammed his fist on the table in anger.

“Tony, you don’t need to say that to know it. Ever heard the saying, ‘you can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear’?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Well, it works the other way too. Pretty people are pretty and have curves, even if they hide them. I can tell, at least.”

“Yeah, me too. You can sense those things, even if they’re not out in the open.”

“Exactly. Maybe they knew her by sight and made… a bet or something. Why not?”

“Mom, don’t say that, please. That hurts even more. If that’s true, I sent an innocent man to his death.”

The Desire to Live

“Is something wrong, Vicky? I saw blood in the toilet.”

“I’m on my period.”

I stared at her for a moment and said:

“But… that much? You don’t usually have heavy periods.”

“Well, there you go. This time it’s like that.”

“When was your last one?”

She looked away, clearly uncomfortable, like she didn’t want to keep talking.

“Yeah, that’s it,” she said finally. “I’m two months late. That’s why it’s so heavy this time.”

“But you’re usually so regular…”

“Yeah, sure. But after what happened to me, you know stress or trauma can mess with your cycle.”

I nodded. A traumatic event like a rape is more than enough to cause that. But it could also be that the rape itself was the reason for… Then I remembered that the day before, Vicky had been talking in her room with her friend Mary for a while, and I could’ve sworn I heard the word “clinic” a few times.

Right then, my expression changed completely, and Vicky noticed.

“Where were you yesterday afternoon?”

“None of your business!” she snapped, and that confirmed my worst fears.

I shook my head in clear disapproval, my face dead serious. Vicky had no choice but to come clean.

“Yeah, I went to get an abortion. You wouldn’t want a granddaughter from a scumbag like that, would you?”

I shook my head again, utterly horrified. A sharp pain hit my stomach, making me wince. All I could manage was:

“How do you know it was a girl?”

“They told me this morning. I didn’t ask to know, but they must’ve messed up. Her chromosomes had two X’s.”

“Right…”

“Well, really, it wasn’t a girl. It was just a clump of cells.”

“Sure. Just like you are. Aren’t you a clump of cells too?”

Vicky went silent. I continued, trying to stay calm, trying not to scream.

“But the difference is, that clump of cells you killed didn’t do anything wrong and deserved to live, while the clump of cells that’s you committed an awful crime, and honestly, deserves death more than that innocent clump of cells that did nothing.”

“It’s the daughter of a rapist! Don’t you get it? A rapist’s daughter!”

“Yeah, and yours too! Your own daughter!”

“It’s a rapist’s daughter!” she insisted. “How could I love someone like that? She’d have his personality!”

“Oh, really? And why his and not yours? Huh? In our family, for example, Tony takes after me, and you’re more like Dad. Why would she have to take after him?”

“Just in case.”

“Right. So we judge her before she’s even born and get rid of her ‘just in case.’ Besides, even if she did take after him, a good upbringing can shape any personality, especially a girl’s. You’re supposedly like Dad—have you inherited any of his behaviors? No, right?”

She stayed quiet but kept staring at me with eyes cold as ice.

“Vicky, it’s not fair that a baby has to pay with her life for the evil that person did. No death is justified, especially not an innocent being who’s done no wrong. Don’t you see that? Didn’t that thought even cross your mind?”

“No.”

“I can’t believe you didn’t even hesitate.”

“Why would I? Who’d hesitate to abort in a situation like mine?”

“Any remotely thoughtful person would.”

“Well, I didn’t! It was a rapist’s kid!”

“A rapist who’s already paid for his crimes, don’t you think? He bled out on a prison floor… Or is that not enough? Are his crimes so bad that his daughter has to keep paying for them? Do more people have to die to satisfy your thirst for revenge? Huh?”

“I don’t want to be a mom. I never have!”

“Fine. Then don’t be. No one’s forcing you, not even after giving birth. You can put her up for adoption and be done with it. But you don’t kill her! Don’t you see the difference? Huh?”

“Yeah, sure, and go through a nine-month pregnancy, right now when I’m a month away from starting at the military academy. After all the studying, after passing the tests, you expect me to give up my dream?”

“Of course. Getting into the academy is so important that if you have to kill someone to get there, you just do it, right?”

“Enough already. The point is, I don’t want to go through this, and I sure as hell don’t want a rapist’s kid. Got it?”

“You’re the daughter of a rapist too. Isn’t your dad a rapist, like all men are? Huh? Isn’t that what you feminists say nowadays?”

“Don’t compare, Mom. This guy did it by force.”

“Oh, you see? That’s the difference, honey! A man can’t be a rapist if the woman wants it. That’s the difference, Vicky! When are you gonna get that through your head?”

She tried to respond, but I cut her off.

“And I don’t want to hear—especially not now—all that nonsense about how we’ve been conditioned to accept and even want what’s basically rape. Got it? I don’t want to hear that in my house again!”

She looked at me with a mix of sarcasm and contempt, then added:

“If I’d gotten the occlusion procedure, none of this would’ve happened. I wouldn’t have been raped. Damn it, but it just so happens I’m allergic to the toxin.”

“When did you try to get that done?”

“As soon as I turned 16. It’s what we all do.”

“Seriously?”

“Of course! What world are you living in? These days, rapes don’t go beyond disgusting groping because of it.”

The occlusion procedure involved injecting a benign toxin at the vaginal entrance, which quickly formed a cyst that acted as a natural barrier, preventing penetration.

“Vicky, do you know how many women regret doing that barbaric procedure?”

“Why? It’s painless and doesn’t cause any issues.”

“Yeah, but it means you can never have sex again.”

“No, it means you can’t be penetrated, which isn’t the same thing. Besides, the ones who regret it are always women your age—women who weren’t raised properly and fell back into chauvinism. But that doesn’t happen anymore. Now we all know we’ll never want a man to penetrate us.”

“They say periods are more painful because there’s barely any room for the flow to come out.”

“Sure. But when you get it done, they also sterilize you, which stops them altogether. That’s what I’m gonna do as soon as I can afford it, so this never happens again.”

“Oh, so you were gonna get the occlusion done? With what money?”

“It’s not as expensive as sterilization. The allowance you give me for going out was enough.”

“You’re not getting any more from me.”

“Whatever. Even though I can’t get the occlusion because of this damn allergy, don’t doubt I’ll get sterilized. With my military salary, I’ll pay for it, and you can’t stop me. They might be able to penetrate me, but they’ll never get me pregnant again.”

I was beyond horrified hearing this.

“So you’ll end up like the eunuchs. Sterile for life.”

“Sterile, yeah, but still sexually active. A woman doesn’t need a damn vagina to have orgasms.”

“Yeah, yeah, same old story. You give up love for hedonism.”

“What love?”

“The love you get from kids, Vicky. The love you give them and the love they give you. Like the joy your daughter—the one you killed—could’ve brought to you and me.” I sighed.

“Mom, I’m someone to pity. I was raped.”

“Yeah, honey, you are. You’re someone to pity because you sentenced, convicted, and executed an innocent being. Your own daughter! What crime did she commit?”

“The crime of having a rapist for a father,” she muttered, turning away.

“And what’s her fault in that? Huh? Answer me!”

She turned back to me, still staring with that same cold, serious expression, completely unbothered by what she’d done.

“Fine. I’ll tell you: there’s only one crime you can pin on that girl, and it’s the grave, unacceptable, unforgivable crime for which all mothers abort their children. Want to know what it is?”

“What?”

“The crime of simply wanting to live.”

Arrest

Rapes existed, of course. They always have. Setting aside the nonsense from our feminists who claim all our husbands rape us, the truth is we've never had reliable data on when there were more. Real rapes, I mean.

In ancient times, there were no statistics. It was the era of monogamy—usually, each man had an "assigned" woman to "satisfy his base instincts," as our feminists put it. Of course, there were also more or less consensual rapes within marriages, though "theoretically," those didn't count. As for the real ones, there were probably few, since prostitution was common, and the punishments back then were almost as harsh as they are now.

Then came the times when monogamy faded—late 20th, early 21st century—but "liberated" women were also free from sexual prejudices. It wasn't hard to hook up with anyone, so I think rapes must've dropped to an all-time low. But that wasn't profitable for the radical feminist groups living off anti-misogyny lobbies that popped up everywhere. So, even if they were rare, every rape was blasted across all media, creating the impression they were common, rampant, constant.

Then we got to our era, where things went completely off the rails. Men were entirely cut off from women, yet rapes didn't skyrocket as much as expected, even though men didn't even have access to porn to "vent their animal instincts."

And they didn't increase much, partly because of the brutal punishments for rapists. Still, they existed, obviously, and we witnessed two firsthand.

We'd never personally known a raped woman. But in a short time, we learned of three. The first was Angela, Victor's partner, whose story shocked us both, especially my husband. Then came Vicky, whose tragedy hit us all hard. And the third victim…

The third victim was me. Except, unlike the other two, I wasn't actually raped.

That day, I came home from the courthouse to the most horrific scene I could've imagined.

When I opened the door after work, I found my husband struggling with four other cops.

It started with two, who Victor let in without much worry, thinking they were bringing a complaint from someone he'd roughed up during an arrest—a common occurrence for cops. But they'd come to arrest *him*. Naturally, he fought back. When they couldn't handle him, they called in the two others waiting in the car, and together, the four subdued him with a taser.

That's when I walked in.

"What's going on here?" I asked, terrified. "What are you doing to my husband?"

Victor was exhausted, dazed from the taser.

"Step aside, ma'am. This man is accused of rape."

"Accused of rape? For what? Who did my husband rape?"

"You, ma'am," one of them replied.

My face twisted, and my heart started racing. I turned to Vicky, who was standing there, watching the scene completely unfazed.

"What have you done, you lunatic? You're all insane!" I screamed. "Wasn't what happened to that boy enough? How many more men have to pay for what was done to you?" I started crying. "Even your own father!"

My daughter’s face hardened, and she shook her head.

“No, Mom… It wasn’t me.”

“What do you mean it wasn’t you?”

“It wasn’t me!” she shouted, looking as shaken as I was.

“Then who? Who was it?”

“I did it,” a voice said.

All eyes turned to where it came from—Angie’s room. There, in the doorway, stood our little girl, staring at us with a serious face and eyes cold as ice.

“I did it,” she repeated. “Dad’s bad. He’s a rapist.”

The Accusation

In the brutal communist dictatorships of the 20th century, children denounced their parents as counterrevolutionaries, and they were dragged off to concentration camps. Our current dictatorship of hate wasn't much different—it allowed, even encouraged, a 10-year-old girl to accuse her father of something as natural as loving her mother. That's how warped our society had become.

Humanity can't learn from past mistakes, and history repeats itself, over and over. No matter that our government was democratically elected—it didn't give them the right to allow something like this. Some things are inherently wrong, immoral, even if the majority supports them.

The poison they fed kids in schools from the moment they stepped inside was truly insane, and the worst part was we couldn't escape it. School attendance was mandatory; there were only public schools, and parents had no option to educate their kids elsewhere.

After Vicky's rape and everything we'd talked about at home, Angie couldn't stay unaffected. She'd heard it all, and to top it off, that day, the Inquisition had been at her school.

It was during recess. She'd just sat through a talk where women from the Permanent Committee for Vigilance and Early Warning Against Misogyny—the Inquisition—showed a documentary about rapes. Real rapes. They made it crystal clear to the girls that any penetration was sexual assault and that uncastrated men were little more than animals.

For years, they'd been coming to schools to indoctrinate our daughters, teaching them all about sexuality from a young age—but only female sexuality, including masturbation classes with dolls.

Yes, classrooms hadn't been coed for a long time. Boys went to separate classes in the few schools that accepted them, or more often, to all-male schools. There, they didn't teach them to masturbate, partly because most couldn't—they were already eunuchs. The rest, the uncastrated ones, were instilled with so much guilt they practically had to apologize for existing.

Honestly, I think our son Tony didn't end up a total wreck because he grew up in a healthy family, with a present father figure who stepped up and kept him grounded in some sense of normalcy.

That day, after the video played in Angie's class, the Inquisition woman told them:

"If you know of any case of misogyny, abuse, sexual assault, rape, or any inappropriate behavior, don't stay silent. Whether it happened to you or you heard about it from someone else, go to the office at the entrance, and they'll help you."

The office at the entrance was where the Inquisition was stationed. Just like in the Soviet Union, where every building had a Party member—the political commissar—in schools, a place of special importance for indoctrinating future voters, there were one or two people there to "ensure" compliance with the rules and keep girls from straying.

When Angie got to the office, no one was at the desk, but she heard two women laughing hysterically inside. They were two punk girls chatting with the woman in charge of the office. Angie almost turned back, but the woman in charge noticed her and approached.

"Hi, sweetie. What did you want?"

She was dressed in a blue blazer, formal enough for the setting—a reformed punk, just enough to work in an office like that.

“They told us in class we shouldn’t stay quiet if we see cases of misogyny.”

“Absolutely! You came to the right place! What’s your name?”

“Angie.”

“Perfect, Angie. We’re here to make society fairer and go after bad men.”

“They also said we shouldn’t stay silent about abuse, harassment, and…”

“Sexual assault,” the inquisitor finished. “That’s right! I can see you’re a star student!”

The woman stepped out of the office and closed the door.

“Wait, come with me,” she said, taking Angie’s hand. “We’ll be more comfortable in this little room.”

Denunciations were always handled discreetly to protect the accuser. It wasn’t the kind of “sensitive” topic to discuss in the middle of a hallway. After they sat down, the punk woman said:

“Alright, Angie. Tell me, have you seen any cases like that?”

The girl nodded.

“Who did it?”

“My dad.”

“Your dad? Did he rape someone?”

Angie nodded again.

“Who?”

“My mom.”

The woman smiled, almost stopping her questions there. *Another misogynist caught!* she thought, and another woman liberated, of course. But curiosity got the better of her.

“How do you know?”

“I hear them.”

“Oh, really?”

She nodded and said:

“They moved me recently, and now my room’s next to theirs. I’ve seen them a few times too. I got up and peeked quietly so they wouldn’t see me.”

“Good job, sweetie.” The woman finished jotting down the details. “What grade are you in?”

“Fifth.”

“Can you tell me where you live?”

“On the street next to the pet food store.”

“Do you know the name of that street?”

Angie shook her head.

“No worries. I’ll check with the office, and they’ll confirm where it is. Just give me your full name, and that’ll be enough.”

Since she was under 12, Angie couldn’t officially file the complaint, but the inquisitor did it for her. With her position, any hint was enough to bring the full weight of the law down on the offender.

As she wrote, the girl asked:

“Dad’s bad, right?”

“Of course, Angie. Men can’t do that to women. It hurts us a lot.”

“Yeah, that’s true. My mom moans, and sometimes I’ve heard her scream.”

Transfer to the Station

Victor had just come off duty that morning and knew the code for the handcuffs—a code that changed daily. The two eunuchs who arrived first didn't know him, but the ones in the car did. Would they have been dumb enough to use the same code, knowing he was a cop? The problem was, if he entered it and pressed the "open" button, whether it was the right code or not, it'd beep, and they'd notice.

Once the pain and daze from the taser wore off, he started taunting the two eunuchs sitting with him in the back seat.

"You're gonna castrate me, huh? Bet you don't have the balls to do it. Oh, wait—balls are exactly what you don't have."

It was about a 20-minute drive from our house to the station, the last part through the city center where speed was limited. His plan was to provoke the eunuchs enough to get them to hit him, then press the button to validate the code. With luck, the cuffs would open, and the sound of the hit would mask the click. Then he'd wait for the right moment to strike the guy on his right, who seemed less alert, steal the taser from the one on his left, use it on him, and escape through that side. But neither of them reacted to his insults, not even when he said, "Since they castrated you, they took your courage, and now you're like oxen." In the end, they pulled into the station's parking lot and stopped the car. He had no choice but to press the button once they were out, and that's when the fight started.

First, he took out the two in the back with a kick and a blow to the face with the metal cuffs, which made them scream in pain and effectively knocked them out. The other two tried to draw their weapons, but he'd already grabbed one's gun and hit him in the head with it. The other got his gun out in time, but a hard kick to his arm sent it flying.

Hearing the commotion, two cops in the parking lot—Oscar and Angela—ran outside. The sergeant on duty joined them.

"What's going on here?" Oscar asked, seeing his old partner fighting the eunuchs.

"Someone turned him in," Angela said. "I just found out."

"Turned him in? For what?"

"For raping… his wife."

"But who…?"

"I don't know, Oscar. Could've been anyone."

"What are you two standing there for?" the sergeant, an unarmed heavyset woman, shouted as she came out. "Help those men!"

Neither moved. In fact, Oscar started toward Victor to help him, but Angela grabbed him tightly.

"Are you crazy? They'll kick you off the force!"

"Let me go!" he yelled, breaking free. But by then, Victor had already taken down all four, leaving them practically out cold.

He had one of their guns in his hands and could've shot or at least threatened them. But that was a line he'd never cross—using a weapon against a fellow cop. So he bolted for the exit, thinking he could make it before they reacted. But he hadn't seen the three others watching, and the sergeant shouted again:

“Shoot him! Didn’t you hear me? Take him down!”

Angela drew her weapon and fired into the air, but Victor didn’t flinch. Just as he’d never shoot a colleague, his instincts told him they wouldn’t either. He was almost at the exit.

Then one of the eunuchs from the scuffle, the one in better shape, drew his gun and aimed.

“Shoot now!” the sergeant screamed again.

Victor was inches from escaping the lot when Angela lowered her weapon. No way was she betraying her partner. But the eunuch was ready to fire. Oscar saw the determination in his eyes and moved to stop him.

Cops were trained to aim for the legs in case of a fleeing suspect, and logic told Oscar that knocking the eunuch’s arm downward would make the shot hit the ground. Hitting it upward could be fatal, possibly striking Victor’s head. But the opposite happened. The eunuch shifted forward slightly, and Oscar couldn’t hit his hand as planned but struck further back. As he pushed the arm down, the hand tilted up, and the shot hit Victor square in the back, piercing his lungs.

Victor collapsed, his body slamming hard against the asphalt parking lot.

Oscar ran to him frantically, turning him over. Victor’s eyes were fixed, glassy, with blood starting to trickle from his mouth. Oscar broke down crying. Years of experience, seeing countless fugitives in the same state, told him something he refused to accept: his friend was dying.

“I couldn’t save you this time, partner…” he said, hugging him, tears streaming.

Victor managed a faint smile of affection, struggling to speak, and finally said:

“You’ve saved me so many times… I’d have been dead long ago if it wasn’t for you.”

“See you, partner,” Oscar managed, his heart shattered with grief.

A New Chapter

Three dates are burned into my life. October 20, when I met him; April 15, when the Medjugorje miracle happened; and November 30, when I lost him.

In my desperation to stop them from taking him, one of the eunuchs had to tase me too, since I was seriously interfering with their work. When I came to, I took a taxi to the station, where Oscar and Angela tried to break the news as gently as they could. Even so, they couldn't stop me from having a massive anxiety attack—the worst day of my life up to that point.

I'd lost the love of my life, my only love, the father of my children, who we buried the next day in the city cemetery. It was a rainy, cold day, full of sadness, bitterness, and desolation—a memory I try not to revisit, because every time I do, a sharp pain makes me shudder.

I never blamed my daughter for it. She wasn't at fault, but rather the vile society we were forced to live in.

Still, I often wonder how much responsibility Victor and I bear. Parents are largely responsible for their kids' upbringing, after all.

I console myself thinking the indoctrination power of this damn society, which has stolen children from their parents, is so strong that there's little we can do to counter such intense coercion.

The only way would be to live cut off from the world—no screens, no talking to anyone. Which is, of course, impossible.

Losing Victor tore our lives apart, and I don't think we ever recovered.

Tony, perhaps, took it the hardest.

He was like his father in many ways but different in others, more like me. He didn't have Victor's outgoing, impulsive nature, which is why the event hit him so hard. But it wasn't the kind of shock that plunged him into deep sadness, like it did me. It was different—it

threw him into a sea of confusion, completely disorienting him. From that day, his behavior became erratic, bipolar, swinging between moments of euphoria and deep sadness or anxiety.

In one of those strange moments, he agreed to meet Judith after her umpteenth call.

After the incident with the eunuch, she'd begged him to come back, pleading, promising she'd do anything he wanted if he'd return.

And that afternoon, he finally went. It was the last thing he wanted to do, and maybe that's why he did it, caught in his inner turmoil.

He was on his way to her place in the city's VIP area, but his mind was elsewhere. It was something he'd thought about doing more than once.

Before Victor's death, he'd considered it several times and dismissed it as absurd.

But now, in the jumble of thoughts swirling in his head, he was seriously reconsidering it.

It was dangerous—a real adventure, something no one did, even though it was the most logical way out. It had nothing to do with Judith, yet he thought about it more than what he'd likely do with her once he got to her place.

Sure, they'd probably make love after all this time. But he couldn't stop thinking about the other thing.

More than once, he'd told himself, "No, it's crazy!" But the thought kept coming back, and each time, it felt like more than just an option. "It could go wrong… It's very likely it'll go wrong! And then it'd be better not to have tried," he thought. Again, it had nothing to do with Judith.

When he reached the huge apartment complex, he pressed the buzzer for Judith's place. The door opened quickly, but he hesitated to go in. She could see him on the video camera, but he stood still.

"Tony?" she whispered, not wanting anyone to hear.

"Tony? Why aren't you coming in?"

My son stood there a moment longer in the doorway, staring into the distance.

"Tony? What's wrong?"

After a few more seconds, he looked at the camera lens, said nothing, showed no expression, then turned and walked away the way he'd come. He was done with it all and decided to do what he should've done long ago.

"Tooooony!" Judith screamed, this time without shame, as if she sensed what really happened: she never saw him again.

Part Three – Susa

The Lovers

The scorching oven of the day was slowly fading, and the first stars were already visible on the horizon, on the opposite side from where the sun was setting.

The sun, weary from its journey, bid farewell with long shadows in a warm embrace of orange and golden hues as the night slowly made its way in.

The evening breeze began to blow gently, allowing the villagers to step outside to cool off. The women sat on their stools and started chatting, while the men remained in the tents, engrossed in discussions of the most varied kinds. The children, however, unfazed by heat or cold, continued playing on the veranda, as they had been doing since lunch, laughing and running without pause.

Karim and his radiant wife had wandered a bit farther, to one of the hills surrounding the village, near her father's herd of goats. They had left the animals below, in the pen, where they were beginning to sleep.

But the couple wasn't sleepy. They were enthralled with each other, unable to stop kissing, caressing, and whispering words of love. Out of sight of the village, they had climbed to the top of the small hill, where they delighted in each other, half-naked, on a spread of blankets laid out on the ground. There, the couple were lost in the ecstasy of love, savoring the sweetest nectars of happiness.

The stars now dominated the horizon, waiting for the moon to bathe the nearby hills with its glow, while in the distance, the timid glimmer of the village's lights struggled to illuminate the sky without success.

The young lovers savored each other, their gazes meeting, and the world seemed to pause around them, with no greater concern than the simple, tranquil, and fulfilling life they led. In the desert's twilight, they found a refuge where they reveled in loving each other intensely, a place where time dissolved, and tomorrow didn't exist. All that remained was the pure essence of love and happiness.

"Karim, are the women from your land beautiful?"

The young man made a slight grimace of displeasure, but she didn't notice.

"No, my love. They're not. They're ugly, jarring, hideous… you can't even look at them."

"And that's why you came here? To find love?"

"That's right, my darling. In my land, there's no love. Only hate. It's a horrible place. That's why I came here, to find you, light of my life and joy of my heart."

They kissed and melted into a tender embrace as the breeze stirred and swayed their hair. They lingered for a moment, feeling the beating of their hearts, until she spoke again:

"I don't understand, Karim. Why do the women in your land prefer to work instead of being with their children? Are they foolish?"

“They are, my love. They are,” he exclaimed. “They’ve been deceived! They’d rather wake up early and endure hardships than build a family that loves them.”

“I can’t believe a woman would choose work over being with her children.”

“But that’s how it is. They hate men. They hate them and fear them. They think that if they marry, their husband will beat them or treat them badly.”

“Are the men in your land bad?”

“No. They’re like me. Neither bad nor good.”

“Well, if the other men are like you, I don’t understand why they don’t want to be with them. Don’t they like to love and be loved? Don’t they enjoy pleasure?”

The young man shook his head, and she continued:

“Are they crazy, Karim?”

“The devil has deceived them, my wife, joy of my spirit and solace of my heart,” he said, kissing her. “Those women live a wretched existence. They’re bitter because they don’t have a family, though they don’t realize that’s the very source of their misery. They spend the money they earn on medicines to cope with the sad, lonely lives they lead.”

“Do those medicines make them happy?”

“No. Those medicines do nothing. They remain bitter, blaming men for their misfortunes.”

“Men?”

“Yes, my love, men. No one wants to take the blame for their own troubles. It’s easier to find someone else to blame to feel better.”

“And why don’t they do something to fix their misery?”

The young man looked up at the sky, gazing at the stars scattered across it like flocks of lights with varying brightness.

“Their only solace is traveling. They roam the world, fleeing farther and farther.”

“Fleeing?”

“Yes, my darling, they flee. They flee to escape the boredom and weariness of a life that isn’t fulfilling.”

“Of course. How could a life without a family be fulfilling?”

Karim kissed his wife and said:

“Those women have spent their lives studying, until the age when people here already have several children. And you know what? Even with all those years of study, they haven’t grasped something as basic as what you just said: a life without a family isn’t fulfilling.”

The woman embraced her husband and whispered in his ear:

“That’s why I want to have lots of children, Karim. I want to have lots of your children!”

Farewell

He had told me the night before, but I didn’t believe him. How could he do something so crazy?

The thing is, I heard noises in the kitchen early in the morning and woke up. It could be Vicky. She’d been out all night, and when I went to bed, she still hadn’t returned. If I’d been sure it was her, I wouldn’t have gotten up. My daughter had been living her own life for a while now, using our house like a boarding house. It was pointless to ask her for explanations, and I didn’t even go into her room anymore.

Could it be Tony? I wondered. It was too early for him to head to the workshop, but… could it be true that he was leaving?

I put on a robe and got out of bed. When I went downstairs, I saw it was him. A backpack was ready by the landing, and he was eating some toast.

“So… it’s true?”

“I told you,” he replied, not looking at me.

“But…”

“Yes, Mom. My flight leaves in a couple of hours.”

My heart stopped at that moment, and my mouth went dry. I stood there for a few seconds, trying not to faint, breathing deeply as I watched him cut his toast and sip his coffee.

“Are you sure about what you’re doing?” I finally asked, my voice trembling.

“No. The only thing I’m sure of is that I’m not staying in this country for one more minute. They’ve kicked me out of here.”

“Son,” I placed a hand on his shoulder, “I understand how you feel. After what happened with Dad…”

“That was just the final straw. And besides,” he looked at me, “others have done it before me.”

“No, Tony. Others have done it, yes, but they haven’t gone so far.”

“You have to go far, Mom. Only there will I be safe.”

“Safe? From what? From Elle?”

“Safe from going crazy and ending up like Ivan or Dad.”

I sighed. Deep down, he was right. Though as a mother, I was going to suffer terribly, and maybe I’d never see him again. But despite everything, I didn’t want to be selfish.

“You’re only taking that backpack?” I pointed at it.

“That’s it. If you’re going to start a new life, you can’t bring things from the old one. They’d just weigh you down.”

“But you’ll need…”

“Money will buy what’s missing.”

“You don’t have much. Your salary isn’t high, and you gave a big chunk of it for that girl’s treatment.”

“It’ll be enough. Things aren’t expensive there. And if not, I’ll work to earn more.”

“If you need anything…”

“What?”

“You know we have Dad’s savings.”

“Yeah, but you don’t have his salary anymore. You’ll need that money sooner rather than later. You still have two daughters to raise and a house to keep up.”

He was right. Even though we could get by comfortably with my salary, things weren’t looking good at the courthouse. They were increasingly suspicious of me for being a “collaborator,” and I could be fired at any moment. But I wasn’t willing to give in and commit injustices like my colleagues did, just for money. Neither as a person nor as a Christian could I allow that.

He finished his toast and downed his coffee. Then he put on the jacket from the closet and grabbed his backpack, heading for the door. My heart started racing, and tears came on their own. I couldn’t find my voice, and all I could do was hug him with all my strength.

After a few seconds where Tony cried too, I covered him with kisses and let him go. He opened the door, and I watched him walk away, striding purposefully toward a taxi waiting on the next street. All I could manage to say was:

“Call me!”

He turned around and gave me one last warm, tender look. Then he rounded the corner and disappeared… never to return.

Susa

The journey had been long and grueling. He didn’t have either of their phone numbers, and finding someone knowing only their name in an underdeveloped country was a true odyssey. Besides, he recalled, a phone number would’ve been useless since there was no cell service in that remote mountain village in the middle of the desert where they lived.

He first landed in the country’s capital after his flight made stops in two other countries. Since the decision to leave was so sudden, he hadn’t considered that a visa usually needs to be arranged through the embassy in one’s home country, a process that can take months.

When he reached passport control and they saw he had no visa, they detained him at the airport while waiting for an emergency visa. But that could happen—or not—since the region’s tangled bureaucracy could delay things indefinitely.

In the end, it took just two weeks, during which he had to sleep on the uncomfortable benches in the transit area, and often on the floor itself. This was only possible because, first, he had no conflicts of interest with the country—he was “clean”—and second, he had to bribe several officials to speed up what was in fact a simple process.

All this was done without knowing the language, of course. In that country, nearly eighty different languages were spoken, and the one he knew was barely used, despite being somewhat related to the others. He was lucky to find an official who spoke it haltingly during one of the crucial steps, which made things much easier.

Once he left the airport, he needed to find transportation to that city in the south of the country. That wasn’t easy either. The taxis or rental cars he tried to hire charged exorbitant prices, and he wasn’t willing to be ripped off. Especially since he wasn’t even sure that, even if he paid, they’d take him where he wanted to go.

In the end, he opted for public transportation. But it was rudimentary. Very rudimentary. He had to take two different trains and a bus, with transfers in two cities that actually took him farther from the southern direction he was aiming for. Not to mention the waiting times, as there weren’t trains or buses running all hours or every day.

In total, it took him a week to reach Susa.

Susa, the place where, after centuries of nomadic life, the Bakhtiari had settled—a hospitable people of shepherds, poets, and warriors who had bravely served their country in the many wars it fought with its neighbors in the past. A people of rugged men and beautiful women, accustomed to living in scarcity and the austerity imposed by the harsh climate. A vital people, despite everything, content with little, whose society was built on family ties—strong bonds of blood and tight-knit connections.

Susa, a city that existed three thousand years before the Romans founded London, once the capital of a global empire stretching from India to the Aegean Sea, was now little more than a small provincial town dedicated to livestock and a nascent basic industry fueled by trade with the surrounding areas.

The land of Elam and the Sumerians, where both peoples lived and thrived, were born and died, fought and conquered, where their women married, loved, gave birth, and died—the cradle of civilization where humans built the first cities in history. Where, a thousand years before Babylon existed, men and women already loved and cherished each other… that's where my son ended up, fleeing from barbarity.

There, he went simply to live, because simply living had become impossible in the West. There, he found a home, a family, and a life—things that were denied to him in the land where he was born.

Reunion

Irnma and her brother hadn’t lived in our country for a long time. After Aisha’s successful operation and recovery, they returned to their homeland, to the tribe where they were born.

Once Tony arrived in Susa, things got easier. At least now he could understand and be understood, and that’s how he managed to find out which village they lived in. That said, he had to ask a good number of people.

On the other hand, the people were friendlier, and there was no danger in getting into cars with strangers. In fact, the person who took him from the city to the village was a fabric merchant heading there on a motorcycle to sell some goods:

“I’m going that way right now. Wanna come?” he said.

“What?”

“On this bike,” he pointed to an old, beat-up contraption, loaded with bundles of fabric hanging off the sides like saddlebags.

“Sure, man,” he continued. “There’s still room for you between the fabrics and me.”

That’s how kind and hospitable these people were, and Tony hopped on, trying not to sway too much to avoid tipping the whole thing over.

It took them a while to get there since the motorcycle couldn’t handle much with all the weight it was carrying. But they finally made it.

The village was a half-ruined cluster of low houses huddled together among dusty paths, with corrals full of chickens, sheep, and goats. There, he was told that at that time of year, Mushir’s clan lived in the hills, and it was unlikely he’d find them in the village. However, since it was Friday, they’d probably attend the small mosque on the outskirts.

So, he decided to wait. He’d already heard about the great hospitality of the Bakhtiari, and the family that took him in that day certainly lived up to it. They treated him courteously, offering him food and drink—dishes he recognized from Irnma’s cooking—and he waited for the time of the religious celebration.

He was so exhausted that he fell asleep, and when he woke up, he found himself covered with a small blanket that one of the family’s little girls had placed over him. Fearing he’d missed the religious service and that they’d already returned to the hills, he hurried to the mosque.

He arrived just in time. As he got there, people were coming out of the service—men on one side, women on the other. But he couldn’t spot Irnma or Mushir. They were all dressed similarly, and everyone looked alike.

It was much later, when he was about to give up, thinking they hadn’t come or had already left, that he heard the unmistakable laugh of the Sufi, almost behind him. Yes, it was him, standing with Irnma and other members of their clan.

“Hey, Mushir!”

When the man saw him, he couldn’t believe his eyes. Was it really him, or a ghost? He blinked several times to make sure and said:

“Tony! Tony, my son!” he said, overcome with emotion. “Is it really you?”

Tears welled up in the old man’s eyes, and the same happened with his sister, while the newcomer also began to cry. The three of them embraced, wrapped in tears, while the others didn’t understand what was happening. Who was this blond Westerner their relatives cared so much about? The Sufi didn’t take long to explain:

“This is Tony! Our dear son and companion! Don’t you remember?”

One of the men nodded, and so did two of the women.

“He’s the one we owe Aisha’s recovery to!” he finished explaining, and then everyone understood. The men greeted him warmly, especially the girl’s father and Irnma’s husband, and the women bowed their heads in a sign of respect.

“How did you get here, son? Why have you come?” asked the man, the patriarch of the clan, still in disbelief.

“Mushir, your people are famous for their hospitality. I’ve renounced my homeland, an ungrateful and cruel place. If you’ll accept me into your family, I’ll work for you. I’m a good mechanic and can earn enough to help you and contribute to meeting your niece Aisha’s needs.”

First Night

They celebrated in grand style, living up to the hospitality of the Bakhtiari. Without leaving the village, they ate and drank again—"These people are eating and drinking all the time," Tony told me. And at night, they went up to the hills, to the village.

There was only one outdoor lantern at one of the tents—the largest one, which served as the tribe's meeting place. In the others, you could make out a few oil lamps inside, where the families were settling in for the night.

"For now, you'll stay with me in my tent," said Mushir. "Don't think that because I'm the chief, I have the best one. It's quite the opposite. Since I live alone, I don't need much, so I keep a modest tent with just the essentials. Later on, you can have one of your own."

When they entered, the old man lit a lamp, and Tony found a small home made up of goat hides sewn together in patches of different colors, depending on each animal's skin. On the ground were handwoven rugs covering the dirt floor. The rugs were vibrant, with traditional geometric patterns reflecting Bakhtiari culture. In the center of the tent was a small wooden table, on which rested some religious items, like a sacred book and a rosary, and beneath it, a stack of books.

In one corner was a small clay stove where Mushir prepared infusions. The aroma of the herbal tea he'd made at noon still filled the air, mingling with the smell of the earth and the rugs. Near the stove was a set of cushions and blankets, where the man usually spent his time—reading his books, praying, and thinking.

The tent's walls were adorned with tapestries and hangings depicting scenes of daily life and the tribe's history. There were also some photographs of Mushir's ancestors, showcasing the importance of his family and their traditions.

In another corner was a simple but comfortable bed, made of thick blankets and wool pillows. Though the tent was small, every corner was filled with details reflecting the life and spirituality of its host. The light from the oil lamp created a warm, inviting atmosphere, casting soft shadows on the walls.

"I only have my bed, as you can see. You can sleep in it, and I'll sleep on the cushions."

"Oh, no way!" Tony replied. "I'll sleep on the cushions."

The man let out one of his characteristic laughs and added:

"Alright, as you wish. Tomorrow you'll meet the rest of the tribe."

"Yes, Mushir. I'm dying to meet Aisha. She must be a lovely child, like the one who helped me when I arrived at the village."

"A child, you say? Aisha?"

"Yeah, of course. Isn't she?"

"Well, she's not a little girl anymore… Anyway, you'll meet her tomorrow. Efrem says he wants to invite you to eat."

The Village

“The Mushir Clan,” as it was officially called, was a group of about 40 or 50 people, some of them nomadic, made up of five or six families. They lived in a village without a name, a few kilometers from Susa, though everyone knew it as “Mushir’s village,” despite four or five other clans living there too.

Mushir was certainly a well-known figure in the area. A widower, his wife had died giving birth to their first child, a boy who passed away weeks later. That tragedy marked him so deeply that he chose not to remarry and remained celibate, dedicating himself fully to religion and philosophical studies. He was the spiritual leader of the clan, and thus the tribe’s chief, though his brother-in-law Efrem, Irnma’s husband, also held some authority.

The village was nestled in a small valley between mountains, which sheltered it from the cold in winter. It was a small cluster of houses and corrals without running water, supplied instead by wells and springs in the area. There was no regular electricity either, with power mainly provided by gasoline generators owned by each clan. These generators were used for all sorts of tasks: lighting, pumping water from wells, powering potters’ wheels…

When summer arrived, the heat was so intense that the clan moved higher up to the hills, where their animals, mainly goats, could graze on the sparse grasses that survived the scorching summer. There, the springs were cleaner and more abundant, and the heat was less oppressive. They set up large tents made of goat hides sewn together and brought nearly all their meager belongings with them.

It was common to build “the veranda,” a large awning attached to the main tent that served as a sunshade, where people spent most of the day. That’s where they set up kitchens and sinks for washing cheese and dishes, and it was the ideal place for gathering and chatting.

Since summer is a long season in those latitudes, they spent most of the year in these tents. There were several tents, one for each family, though the smaller ones were used only for sleeping and privacy.

The local economy was very basic, with much of it based on bartering. They lived primarily off subsistence livestock farming and the products it provided. Surplus goods were sold in the city, making up the tribe's main source of income.

On market days, they traveled to the city to sell cheeses and young goats, using the earnings to buy grains, clothing, soap, and manufactured goods.

Prices were very low, so they needed to sell a lot to make any profit. And to sell a lot, they had to produce a lot, which meant the more hands contributing to production, the more income the families would have.

The community was poor but tightly knit, unlike the wealthy, lonely, and bitter West. The women gathered and helped each other raise their children, endlessly chatting about village gossip and rumors. At night they sang, danced, laughed—in short, they were happy. It was nothing like the supposed patriarchal Muslim hell portrayed in the West. The few women who emigrated, like Irnma, did so purely for economic reasons, and in fact, they all continued sending money to their husbands back in the East.

Encounter

Based on how she'd always been described to him, Tony thought Aisha was a little girl, maybe a preteen, not much older than his sister Angie.

It's also true that when he met Irnma and Mushir, he didn't yet speak the language well and misunderstood the word "dokhtar" as meaning "little girl," when it can also mean "young woman." The term "zan" on the other hand, refers to "woman" and is generally used for married women.

Efrem's tent was one of the last in the village, bordering the desert, and contrary to what you'd expect, it wasn't made of goat hides but of canvas. This was despite Efrem, Aisha's father, being one of the clan's biggest goat owners. The reason was obvious: the girl's illness consumed the family's income, and the hides were sold to cover those expenses.

The young woman couldn't walk, not even with crutches, and could only move around in a wheelchair or by leaning on stools, tables, posts, or the like. But she could stand for a few minutes before muscle weakness forced her to sit.

A few meters from the tent was a well, where they'd set up a stone fountain that she was using at that moment to help her sisters wash the dishes used for guests. They were finishing preparations to treat Tony to a splendid meal.

She was taller than her sisters, and when she tired of sitting, she'd stand for a few minutes to stretch. Knowing Tony was coming to meet her and eat with her family, she had put on her finest clothes—a beautiful dark tunic with golden geometric patterns and a matching headscarf that partially covered her hair.

When she saw him arrive, she turned to greet him, and my son discovered a slender young woman just a bit younger than him, filling a small clay jug with water at the stone fountain.

He didn't realize at first that this was Aisha, though he quickly figured it out when he saw the wheelchair nearby. At that moment, her large, almond-shaped eyes, the color of chrysoberyl, locked onto his blue ones, and from that very instant, he fell in love with her, and she with him.

It was love at first sight, with Cupid pulling out all the stops. He shot a precise arrow that pierced both their hearts simultaneously, and they stood there, captivated, gazing at each other for several seconds. Time stopped, and even the world seemed to pause to witness the scene. Her sisters noticed and whispered among themselves.

Since early that morning, Irnma had been preparing the meal, with her four unmarried daughters helping in the kitchen. The aromas of spices, fresh herbs, and freshly baked bread filled the tent. While the girls finished the stew, Irnma had made sure everything was clean and tidy, with the rugs swept.

When Tony entered the tent, austere on the outside, he found a true Bakhtiari home, much more decorated than Mushir's, though not overly so. Beyond the entrance was the living area, which doubled as the kitchen. On one side was the couple's bedroom, and on the opposite side, the four girls shared a space. Efrem was inside, sitting on a stool, and greeted him with a warm smile and a hearty hug, welcoming him to his home. Irnma did the same.

Though traditionally women kept a more formal distance, especially with a foreign visitor, Tony was already like family, and they treated him as such.

At that moment, Irnma instructed her daughters to set the table. Normally, they ate on a *sofreh*, a decorated cloth spread on the floor, but in deference to the guest, they set up a low table with cushions around it for the seven of them to sit.

While Efrem and Tony chatted about the journey's anecdotes, the women bustled about, bringing plates, jugs, and drinks. Even Aisha, despite being in her wheelchair, moved around the tent helping her sisters.

Leila, one of them, brought a tray of black tea, dates, and nuts to the two men, much to Aisha's disappointment, as she'd wanted to do it herself.

She kept looking at him while he did the same, all while trying to keep up with the conversation with Efrem. Before he knew it, the table was set, and Efrem invited him to sit, with the rest of the family following.

On the table was *chelo kabab* (marinated meat skewers served with rice), *khoresh* (a savory stew with vegetables and meat), and a traditional Bakhtiari dish, *dampech* (steamed rice with herbs and beans). There was also fresh bread, yogurt, salads, and pickles.

After Efrem, as the head of the family, invited Tony to take the first bite as a gesture of honor, he took the second, and the women followed.

The girls didn't talk much, though they all looked at him curiously, especially Leila and Aisha. The latter was completely entranced, almost in a daze, not missing a single gesture or word he said.

"So, Tony, are you planning to stay here for long?" Efrem asked.

"Yes, I told you yesterday. My intention is to live here, with you all. Honestly, I have nowhere else to go."

"Life here is tough, son. It's not like what you have in the West."

"Efrem, life there is much tougher. They can arrest and kill you at any moment, like they did to my father. I came here looking for freedom and safety."

"Your father was a great man," Irnma chimed in. "I only met him once, but he treated me with a lot of respect."

"Yes," Tony sighed. "He always treated women with great respect. It's a shame they didn't do the same for him."

"Let's leave the sad stuff aside," said Efrem. "What's clear is that you're a brave man, and we Bakhtiari admire courage as a great virtue, second only to our hospitality. Have you thought about what you'll do with your time?"

"Mushir told me you need skilled and versatile mechanics here."

"Yes. My 'brother' isn't wrong."

"He offered me his house in the village to set up a workshop. I'm not sure if there'll be enough clients there…"

"There will be. And not just in the village. From what my wife tells me, your skills are extensive, and the mechanics here know little—they do what they can. I assure you, people will come from all the surrounding villages, even from Susa. I think you'll work much more here than in your homeland!" he laughed, with a chuckle similar to his brother-in-law's, and everyone raised their tea cups in a toast.

After they finished eating, the girls cleared the table and offered more tea, fresh fruits, and sweets. The conversation grew more relaxed, and Efrem began sharing stories from his youth —tales that clearly bored his daughters, who gradually retreated to their room. Only Leila and Aisha stayed, both captivated by the visitor. Eventually, Leila left too, called by her sisters, leaving Aisha until the end.

After a while, Tony felt it was time to go. His hosts and Aisha accompanied him to the exit, saying goodbye with warm hugs. The daughters also stepped out briefly from the room, where they'd been whispering all afternoon, and bid him farewell with shy smiles.

The last words of the day were for Aisha, who had stood up to see him off.

“I’m so glad to meet you, Aisha. I always wanted your mother or uncle to show me a picture of you, but I have to admit, no photo could’ve done you justice. You’re a woman of truly extraordinary beauty…”

The young woman blushed deeply, and her parents laughed, exchanging glances. All she could manage, trying to slow her racing heart, was:

“I’m so glad to meet you too,” she said, locking eyes with him. “And thank you for everything you’ve done for me.”

Tony smiled and left, heading toward Mushir’s tent. After about twenty steps, he looked back, and there she was, still at the tent’s entrance, leaning on one of the poles holding up the canopy, staring at him. In that moment, unnoticed by anyone, he brought his hand to his lips and blew her a kiss. She returned the gesture, making sure her parents had gone inside.

Adaptation

At first, the Bakhtiari welcomed Tony with some skepticism. With a lot of warmth, of course, because they are a hospitable people, and besides, the young man had been a significant benefactor to their family. Still, they didn't think he'd last long among them. The village's harsh conditions—no running water, scarce electricity, and virtually no recreational facilities—were far from the comforts typically enjoyed in the West. Moreover, since the clan spent most of the year in the hills, the tents were even less comfortable, with their inhabitants sleeping on straw mats, cushions, or goat hides on the ground.

There were no workshops in the village, and only a few in the city. Vehicles, mostly motorcycles, were repaired collectively—someone knew about bodywork, another about engines, another about electrical systems, and so on. For major breakdowns, if they could afford it, they had to hire a tow truck from the city.

On those rugged paths, motorcycles were the best mode of transport. These vehicles were used for everything, often loaded to the brim, sometimes with trailers attached to carry bulkier items. The electric motors and bikes were old and worn out, breaking down frequently, and there weren't enough skilled people to fix the more complex issues.

In this context, Tony's arrival was a blessing for the people. Almost as soon as he got there, he opened a mechanic's workshop in the village, in a space owned by Mushir. With the savings he'd brought, he bought the necessary equipment to outfit the workshop with the machines required for its purpose.

Every day at dawn, he rode a motorcycle down to the village and opened the shop. By the time he arrived, there were usually people waiting for him, as word had spread, and folks came from all the surrounding villages. Efrem had been right in predicting he'd have more than enough work. Sometimes, Tony didn't return until night, having to take food prepared by Irnma.

The herd belonging to Aisha's parents became the largest of all, as people often paid for his services with goats, milk, cheese, honey, and other goods. These products were then sold in the city to generate the money Aisha desperately needed for the expensive medicines that kept her debilitating illness at bay. This provided an extra source of income for the clan, which was crucial for her costly treatments. Aisha was much better after her successful operation, but she needed medication to maintain her progress and slow the disease's advance, or at least keep it from worsening quickly.

Tony seemed happy and, for the moment, had adapted well to the rugged life of these people compared to the one he'd led before. Speaking and understanding the Bakhtiari dialect made it easy for him to integrate into the community. When he wasn't at the workshop, he milked goats or made cheese—though he did these tasks less and less as mechanics gradually took up all his time.

In short, he surprised those who bet his stay would be brief. And, as could only be expected, love had a lot to do with it.

Oh, love! It can transform the hardest straw mat into a plush bed and turn the bitterest meals into exquisite delicacies. It can make the roughest tasks feel like gentle caresses and turn the harshest heat into a soft, refreshing breeze.

Flirtations

Women are the same everywhere, in every country and era. Just as in my old shared apartment we talked endlessly about Victor, in Mushir's village, the girls couldn't stop talking about my Tony.

If women already spend the day chatting and gossiping about all sorts of topics, in Mushir's village, it was all anyone talked about. From the moment Tony arrived, every unengaged young woman expressed admiration for him, and they all "swooned" when he passed by. It's no surprise. Like his father, his bearing, height, presence, and beauty—I know I'm his mother, but it's the truth—drew admiration.

Any of those girls would have been thrilled if Tony showed interest in them, though because of his connection with Irnma, he mostly spent time with her daughters. Among them, both Leila and Aisha were very interested in him, and out of courtesy, he spoke with both. The whispers, gossip, rumors, hypotheses, and conjectures flew faster than the wind.

Tony seemed like just another young man in the tribe. He'd left with little baggage and, in no time, was dressing like a Bakhtiari: loose pants that cinched at the ankles, a wide shirt, a vest, a *chogha*—a long coat-like outer garment—and a scarf around his neck in winter.

He was so integrated into their culture that I shouldn't have been surprised when he called to tell me… he was going to convert to Islam.

That day, he'd gone down to Susa, the city, since there was no phone coverage in the village or the hills.

"Mom, I'm fully integrated with these people. I dress like them, speak like them, eat what they eat, work alongside them—I'm one of them! This is the only thing left for me to fully belong, to not be alone when they go to the mosque."

After the initial shock and subsequent fluster, I tried to stay calm and measured.

“Okay, but why do you have to integrate *completely*? Huh? Why can’t you just stay as you are?”

There was a silence on the line, and then he answered:

“Because I’m in love.”

There it was!

Against that, I couldn’t fight. If it had been any other reason, I might have convinced him. But against a young man’s heart in love, there was nothing to be done. Any argument would only have driven a wedge between us without changing his mind. The chances of persuading him were practically nil.

The truth is, no Muslim father would give his daughter to an infidel—a non-Muslim.

So, I resigned myself. After all, my son, like my daughters, though baptized and confirmed in the true faith, were practically atheists, like most young people. So, having a monotheistic religion like this, closer to ours, was better than having none at all.

Plus, Muslim women tend to have many children, which meant I’d soon have grandchildren. That was something I’d always been excited about. I could only expect them from him, as with my daughters… well, better not to comment.

The Shahada

The entire clan gathered at the veranda to witness this momentous event, never before seen in the tribe.

The community, led by Mushir, organized a reception to welcome the new convert. Tony had prepared for it and stood at the center of the circle that had formed.

In the Shahada, the new Muslim is also consecrated to a family, and if they don't have one, they are assigned one. Being fatherless, it was mutually agreed that Tony would become Mushir's adopted son from that day forward.

As the tribe's spiritual leader, the Sufi began with a welcome speech, then explained the Shahada—the words of conversion—detailing their meaning and the importance of this declaration of faith. The goal was to ensure the new convert fully understood the commitment they were making.

Then, Tony stepped forward and pronounced in Bakhtiari the phrase that fully integrated him into the Muslim community:

"Man gawahi midaham ke hich khodaii joz Allah nist va Mohammad payambar-e oost."

Next, he said it in Arabic:

"Ash-hadu an la ilaha illallah wa ash-hadu anna Muhammadan rasulullah."

And finally, he recited it in his native tongue:

"There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is His prophet."

The entire community erupted in joy, and his new father had to clear his throat several times to continue the celebration.

After the Shahada, all the faithful prayed the *Salat* to celebrate the conversion, followed by the giving of gifts: a Quran, presented by the officiant, and a prayer bead rosary, given by Efrem, Aisha's father.

To conclude, Mushir told the new Muslim:

"You are now our brother and beloved son of the Prophet, as well as mine. What name do you choose for your new life?"

He'd been suggested many names, but none fully appealed to him. In the end, he chose one of his own.

"Karim," he answered. "I want that to be my new name."

"Why did you choose that one over others?"

"Because I like it," he replied, cool as a cucumber.

The Sufi and the rest of the community expected an Arabic or Persian name, perhaps one tied to a famous figure from Islamic history or their land. But Tony chose it because it was the name of a famous Algerian footballer he admired. Naturally, he wasn't going to admit that was the reason.

"Very well. From now on, your name will be Karim Abdulacid, a name that will mark you as my son everywhere."

The tribe cheered again, and all those present—now also his relatives—warmly congratulated him, showering him with more gifts from some friends.

To close, everyone prayed together, including the new convert, Karim Abdulacid, son of Mushir, of the Mushir Clan, of the Bakhtiari of Susa.

Efrem

The Muslim courtship process, naturally, is not like the Western one. In fact, it doesn’t really exist as such. Rarely do “couples” go out alone to places like the movies, a park, or similar spots. All meetings are accompanied by others, usually the mother or siblings.

Whenever Tony met with Aisha, Leila was always there, vying for Tony’s attention herself, or Amira, the other sister. It was, in essence, like the West a hundred or two hundred years ago. Of course, there were no premarital relations or anything resembling them, nor were there open declarations of love.

Another peculiarity is that the suitor never declares his intentions to marry directly to the bride but to her father, who may or may not consult his daughter’s opinion. It wasn’t uncommon for girls to be surprised by the news, though feminine intuition rarely failed, and such things were often anticipated.

But parents didn’t have that intuition, and they were often the first to be surprised.

It was some time after the Shahada, once Ramadan had passed. As gossip travels like the wind, and the wind reaches everywhere, Efrem, Aisha’s father, had already heard about “the matter” firsthand.

The man was always immersed in his goat-selling business, an occupation that consumed all his time. He had to work hard, as his family of eight had no male children. In that culture, this was a problem, especially when it came to marriage, as the bride’s father was traditionally responsible for funding the lavish wedding feasts. In fact, many engagements were delayed for this very reason—because families didn’t have enough money and didn’t want to look bad compared to other weddings.

Efrem’s business wasn’t doing badly. The advantage of a large family was the abundance of cheap labor. Besides him, who essentially acted as the salesman, traveling to and from Susa to sell animals, cheese, hides, or meat, there was his wife, Irnma, and all their daughters, who spent their days milking, tanning, or tending and herding the flocks. Of course, he also

had help from Mushir, his brother-in-law, who, having no family of his own, could lend a hand whenever needed. In fact, Mushir handled the grimmest task—slaughtering the goats and preparing their meat whenever a client didn't want live animals.

Of the entire family, the only one who didn't contribute was Aisha, precisely because her illness prevented her from doing so. This was always a source of tension among the sisters. Some envied her for not working, while others pitied her, and rightly so. These feelings often shifted among them, sometimes coexisting in the same person. Above all, Aisha was, by far, her parents' favorite.

So, the rumor that Karim was going to ask for her hand was met first with surprise and then with skepticism.

At that time, his two eldest daughters were already married and had given him some grandchildren. There were still four more to marry, including Aisha, who, in his view, was the least likely to ever marry, if she ever did.

Efrem was truly astonished when he heard that Karim intended to marry his daughter, and his first thought was that the rumor was false. But several people had told him, including Irnma. What surprised him most was that a man like Tony—handsome, in the prime of life, someone who could have his pick of anyone—had set his sights on a disabled woman.

Especially since his other three unmarried daughters were just as beautiful, and he would have gladly given any of them to him.

Efrem was thus faced with a great dilemma, as he wasn't at all sure this hypothetical marriage would succeed. On the other hand, he didn't want to upset the man who had done so much for this very daughter, his most cherished one. Indeed, if it hadn't been for Tony's money—his own and what he'd secured from Judith—Aisha would likely be in a dire state by now, or perhaps even dead.

That was the dilemma. He would have preferred Karim ask for the hand of any of his other daughters, and he would have gladly agreed.

And, let's be honest, he also felt the typical jealousy of any father, whose favorite daughter a stranger was trying to take away—a daughter who, because of her disability, was less likely to marry and would always stay by his side to keep him company in his old age.

In the end, he told himself, he'd have to talk to Aisha first. With a bit of luck, maybe the girl wasn't too interested, and that would settle the matter.

Wedding Rumors

He had come from the city after closing a deal for the sale of some young goats.

Before entering, he made sure no one else was in the tent, and indeed, there wasn't. Irnma and the other daughters were still at the corral, finishing milking the goats.

When he entered, he found Aisha sitting in her wheelchair, embroidering a *rusari*, a silk headscarf. She was decorating it with intricate geometric shapes and colorful little flowers. When she saw him, she smiled and continued her work.

"Daughter, there's talk, people believe, some say…"

"What, Father?"

The man cleared his throat and took a deep breath before letting it out.

"That Karim is going to ask for your hand."

The young woman was overjoyed, as she wasn't sure her beloved would actually be interested in her. In fact, Leila was a real rival, and far more forward. Tony didn't seem to show much interest in her sister, but at times, Aisha thought Leila might win him over, despite the clear interest he seemed to have in her. But the poor girl couldn't stop tormenting herself, wondering if his apparent attention to her was all just her imagination, driven by her own desires rather than reality. It didn't make much sense that a man, especially one as attractive, handsome, and charming as Tony, would want to marry a disabled woman.

Her father's words brought her immense relief. She broke into a wide grin, and her heart began to race. The man paused and asked:

"Would you want to marry him?"

"Father," she said, not looking up from her embroidery, "whatever you decide will be fine."

"Daughter, that answer doesn't help me make a decision."

She was tempted to shout with all her might that yes, she desperately wanted to marry Karim, and that she could neither live, sleep, nor focus on anything but thinking of him since the very moment they met. However, her modesty and decorum prevented her from making such a declaration. Her father continued:

"Because I don't want to make any decisions without your input. I don't want to make the same mistake as with Sazalar…"

The girl made a slight grimace of displeasure at that name and continued her work.

"Your mother and Mushir speak wonders of Karim, and though I don't know him as well as they do, he seems like a great guy to me too. He's friendly, kind, generous, hardworking… But…"

She stopped embroidering and looked up.

“What are you afraid of, Father?”

“I don’t want what happened with Sazalar to happen to you again—he rejected you as soon as you got sick,” he said, also showing displeasure. “If it weren’t for the important business I keep with him, I’d never speak to him again.”

“Father, Karim already knows about my illness.”

“Yes, but he’s a young, strong man. What if one day he tires of you… rejects you… I don’t know… And you know we usually marry within our own kin, and…”

“Karim is my cousin! He’s Mushir’s son!”

“Yes, yes,” he nodded, “but, you know, he’s not of our race…” He looked up. “I’m not so worried about our tribe, because the Bakhtiari are tolerant and hospitable, but… who knows! You’re both so young… Maybe one day you’ll leave us… go far away and meet other people… Maybe those people will reject him, or reject you…”

He had been talking to himself, unaware that Aisha was sobbing uncontrollably. Big tears rolled down her cheeks, soaking the *rusari*. Efrem approached her, knelt down, and hugged and kissed her affectionately: “Aisha, my little girl! Don’t cry!” he pleaded. “Please, you’re breaking my heart!”

The Proposal

As the rumors predicted, what had to happen, happened.

That day, instead of eating at the workshop, Tony closed early and headed to the village.

The road from the village to the hills was bad. Very bad. It wasn't paved, was full of potholes, and passed near some cliffs.

But he sped over the dirt, dodging potholes and practically "flying" over embankments, jumping them two at a time as if in a motocross race. The motorcycle skidded through curves, kicking up gravel to the roadside as he accelerated full throttle, and in just a few minutes, he was in front of Efrem's tent.

He brushed the dust off his clothes, ran his hand through his hair to tidy it somewhat, took a deep breath, and entered the tent.

It was noon, and the entire village was napping in their private tents. In the large tent, only Efrem was there, along with some women finishing washing the dishes.

When they saw him enter, the whispers and giggles started, and they hurried to leave as quickly as possible.

Once they were alone, the suitor felt a knot in his stomach. Though he'd rehearsed his words over and over, reality always felt more daunting.

Efrem was seated at the back of the tent, watching him impassively as he approached. The idea was to have a friendly chat, as they were friends, but Tony didn't dare get too close. He stopped about three or four meters away, took a deep breath, and let it out.

Efrem looked at him with a mix of tenderness and seriousness. His eyes reflected the affection he'd developed for him since his arrival, though he took his time to respond. Those

few seconds of silence felt like hours to Tony. Finally, he spoke, and the suitor received an unexpected answer:

“Karim, I would give you my daughter with all my love. You know you’re like a son to me, and as such, I want the best for you. However, Aisha is frail. She’s ill, as you know, and she may not be able to give you a proper lineage.”

Tony was taken aback by this response, as he’d already discussed the wedding preparations with Irnma, the mother, and everything seemed in order. But now, facing Efrem, it seemed the father had other plans. The man continued:

“But I have other daughters, also very beautiful, who are healthy and strong and could give you many robust children. Wouldn’t you prefer Leila, Amira, or Zahra…?”

“No,” Tony interrupted. All his caution was cast aside, and he said with determination: “I want Aisha. It’s her or no one.”

Efrem looked at him intently and began to smile. Then he stood, approached him, and they embraced warmly:

“She’s yours, Karim. I wish you all the happiness in the world, and may Allah shower you with His blessings.”

The Wedding

I couldn’t attend the wedding. A neighboring country had gone to war with the West, and all flights to the region were canceled for security reasons. Even so, from my home, I experienced it as if I were there.

It was a splendid spring day, not too hot.

The bride looked stunning. Her large almond-shaped eyes seemed even bigger with the effect of her makeup and the henna applied to her hands and feet, following traditional patterns symbolizing happiness and prosperity.

She wore a *jomeh*, a long tunic made of silk and velvet, adorned with colorful embroidery and embellishments, featuring golden motifs and sequins, paired with a *sholarqeri*, a pleated skirt worn beneath the tunic. Over it, she had a velvet vest decorated with intricate floral designs, complemented by a *rusari*, the glossy silk headscarf sewn with colorful flowers. Naturally, she wore earrings, necklaces, and bracelets, many of which, especially the gold ones, I had given her.

The groom’s attire was no less impressive. The black *chogha* and loose *sholar* pants were complemented by a belt with a golden buckle that cinched the *chogha*, adding a touch of elegance to the ensemble. Finally, he wore *giveh*, durable traditional shoes, abandoning the classic military boots he used to wear everywhere.

The veranda was decorated with garlands and paper streamers that the other women and children had been preparing for days. For the ceremony, two chairs were set up, one for each of the couple, though they were supposed to stand. But Aisha couldn’t remain standing for more than a few minutes, so a chair was provided for her, and to avoid drawing attention, one was included for the groom as well. Still, the young woman bravely endured

the nearly half-hour ceremony without sitting, holding firmly onto Tony's arm, always showing a smile and a look of joy on what was the happiest day of her life.

After Mushir read the appropriate verses from the Quran and the community elders blessed the couple, the dancing began.

While a few men played the *toshmal*, the entire community danced, laughed, and sang. Unfortunately, Aisha couldn't take a single step, but she urged her sisters to dance with the groom in her place. Leila, who looked the most like the bride, delighted the guests with her grace and the effort she put into matching the groom's energy.

As evening approached, dinner was served. Throughout the day, people had been drinking plenty of *doogh*, a traditional beverage made of diluted yogurt with water, salt, and mint, to quench the thirst brought on by so much dancing.

At the banquet, as expected, there was grilled kid goat, along with *ash-e reshteh*, a soup made with noodles, legumes, spinach, and herbs. For dessert, they served *baklava*, a sweet made of layered pastry filled with nuts and soaked in honey syrup, and a saffron ice cream served with pistachios and rose water.

It was a true delight, representing a significant expense for Efrem and Mushir, but the occasion was worth it. Aisha, *the pearl of our family, the star that guides us, the light that brightens our nights, the flower that cheers the desert, the water that gives it life, and the rhythm that shapes our days*, was married—praised in the poems always dedicated to the weakest, the most vulnerable, the most fragile, and thus, the most beloved of their daughters.

Irnma was in the middle of the banquet, radiant, happier than ever, and asked for silence to recite a sublime poem, a song, which her powerful soprano voice turned into pure lyricism, bringing everyone to tears:

I had to leave my land, my beloved home,
For Aisha, my daughter, was sick and in pain.
With a broken heart, I journeyed to the West,
Where fate led me to meet Karim, so brave.
I treated Karim like a son, with love and devotion,
And he returned it with tenderness and understanding.
In my loneliness, he was my comfort and guide,
His kindness and support filled my life with joy.
The day came when I had to leave, with sadness in my soul,
But upon returning to my land, I found peace.
Thanks to Karim, Aisha was healed,
His love and care were the medicine we longed for.
My joy was complete when Karim came to our land,
And together, as a family, we celebrate this new era.
Now, my two beloved children are united in marriage,
And my heart overflows with happiness and love.
What more can I ask for in this blessed life?
Oh, Aisha, oh, Karim! How I love you, children of my life!
May Allah fill you with joy and shower you with blessings,

And may your love flourish through all seasons.
Today, on this special day, I want to recall,
The difficult moments we had to overcome.
Aisha, my dear daughter, fought with courage,
And Karim, with his love, restored her joy.
I remember the sleepless nights, filled with worry,
And how Karim, with his patience, gave us comfort.
His presence was a beacon in the darkness,
And his kindness, a balm for our anxiety.
Seeing them together now, my heart fills with gratitude,
For the love they share and their attitude.
May this union be strong and lasting,
And may they overcome any obstacle together.
May Allah grant them health and prosperity,
And may their home be filled with happiness.
May each day be a new beginning,
And may their love grow without end or decline.

Everyone applauded wildly, tears streaming down their faces, with that mother crying the most. She hugged and kissed her daughter and the groom, and everyone toasted to the happiness of the newlyweds.

Everyone was joyful, except perhaps the man who had rejected marriage to Aisha when she was young, upon learning of her illness. Sazalar was someone Efrem had to keep on good terms with due to important business dealings, so he had to invite him to the wedding. But it was clear the man was resentful in some way. He approached Efrem, who was drinking *doogh* with Mushir.

“I don’t understand how you could give your daughter to that infidel,” he commented after taking a sip.

“He’s no longer an infidel,” Efrem replied.

“Yes, but…”

“Weren’t we Persians infidels before the Prophet’s armies arrived here?” Mushir pointed out.

“Exactly,” Efrem confirmed. “This man is now a Muslim, for Allah has moved his heart without shedding blood.”

“Blessed be He!” said the other two.

“And I give thanks to the Almighty,” the father continued, “for He has honored me by using my daughter, a cripple, to glorify His holy name. Blessed be Allah!”

“Blessed be He!” the other two responded, and the three toasted with their cups of *doogh*, which they finished and were collected by someone passing with a tray.

“I ask your forgiveness, Efrem, if I’ve offended you,” Sazalar said, seeming sincere. His eyes had been opened.

“Besides,” Efrem went on, “my daughter wouldn’t be alive today if it weren’t for that man. For the money he secured for her treatment.”

“We owe him a lot, Sazalar,” Mushir added.

“It’s as if he bought her, isn’t it?”

“In a way, yes.”

Honeymoon

It was a simple and austere honeymoon. They didn't go on any trips, as they didn't need to. They had each other, and they reveled in one another, exploring their bodies with a passionate fervor that left Aisha in ecstasy, something she never thought possible. She was head over heels for him, and he for her, and she gave thanks to Allah every day for granting her such a husband when she had always believed her disability would doom her to a life of spinsterhood.

When they weren't making love, they told each other stories, talked, and chatted. At night, they climbed the hill to gaze at the stars. They left the wheelchair where the path narrowed, and he carried her in his arms to the summit. Tony had built a special all-terrain wheelchair that allowed her to navigate the steep slopes of those mountains. He had also adapted a sidecar to a motorcycle, and together they roamed the paths every Friday, the Muslim holy day, in an endless honeymoon.

How they loved each other! Yes, with hardships and scarcity, as much of Tony's earnings went toward the expensive medications Aisha needed to manage her illness. But that was no obstacle to their boundless happiness.

And children soon followed. Everyone told them it wasn't advisable to have them. Not because there was a risk of the children inheriting the illness—Tony didn't carry the gene, which both parents would need to pass on. The problem was the mother's overall health. The doctors in Susa treating her case advised against pregnancy, as it could worsen her condition. But she burned with the desire to have children, and Tony didn't let her down. And, contrary to the doctors' expectations, the changes in her body didn't worsen her health—they improved it. Nature activated every biological mechanism available to prepare a mother's body to sustain two lives, and Aisha was able to give birth and raise her little one with better health than she'd had even before the pregnancy. Indeed, little Nasser—meaning "Victor" in Persian—came into the world bringing not only joy to his parents but also health to the woman who gave him life. A radiant, fulfilled woman whose greatest dream of having children had come true.

The Woku Game

“Man, what a woman, Karim! What a woman!” Akmán blurted out. “She’s seriously insatiable!”

Leila, Aisha’s sister, had just married Akmán, Tony’s closest friend in the land. Karim grinned and gave the man a pat on the shoulder. They’d just finished dinner, invited over to try an awesome stew Aisha had whipped up for the newlyweds.

Right then, the two guys had stepped out to the latrines, and Akmán was taking the chance to spill some personal stuff. The night was gorgeous, and other families were doing the same, hanging out outside their tents to catch a breeze.

“So, dude, how many times can you, like, *go* in one night?”

“As many as it takes, Akmán. As many as it takes.”

Akmán looked kinda annoyed. He was expecting a solid number from an engineer, not some vague answer that left him hanging.

“Yeah, but…”

“Look, man, you gotta keep up with her. That’s what marriage is about. Didn’t Mushir tell you that at your wedding? He sure as hell told me, and I heard him say it at yours too. You gotta step up to whatever your wife needs!” Tony gave him another pat, flashing a big grin, and headed back to the tent.

Meanwhile, inside, the two sisters were having a similar chat.

“Leila, guys are wired different from us,” Aisha said. “They’ve got this ‘issue’ where, to, uh, enjoy themselves, they gotta… you know, *let it out*. So after a few rounds, they’re tapped out. No more juice, no more fun. Get me? You gotta wait for it to… recharge.”

“Got it.”

“We don’t have that problem, ‘cause we don’t need to *unload* anything. That’s the deal.”

This time, Aisha was a bit clearer, but she still didn’t give the number Leila was fishing for. Leila was dying to know how many times Tony could *unload* to compare it to her husband.

These two were the closest of all Irnma and Efrem’s daughters. They looked alike and were close in age, but their personalities were total opposites. That’s probably why they clicked. Aisha was chill and didn’t mind answering spicy questions, while their older married sisters would blush or clam up.

“Plus,” Aisha went on, “it doesn’t have to be at the same time. Like, you could, I dunno, enjoy yourself three, four, five times, and he might only do it once or twice. Depends on what your guy’s willing to do for you. You feel me?”

That answer hit the spot, and Leila smiled.

Just then, Tony walked back into the tent, with Akmán trailing a moment later.

When there wasn’t much else going on, the Bakhtiari would dress to the nines for family dinners like this one. Akmán hadn’t gone all out, but his wife was decked out in her fanciest gear, as well as Aisha.

As soon as she got to the tent, she’d ditched her *rusari* headscarf, letting her wavy hair spill out in a bold move that didn’t go unnoticed—especially by her sister, who shot her a side-eye.

When the guys came back in, little Nasser started crying, and Aisha moved to get him. But her husband beat her to it and started soothing the kid. The sisters had already cleared the table, and Leila piped up, “Hey, why don’t we play some *woku*? I brought the dice and cards.”

Aisha gave her a look but didn’t say anything. Woku was a kid’s game with an adult version. You draw a card, roll the dice, and the winner gets to ask someone a question based on the card’s theme—love, family, friendship, or work.

Leila won the first round, and of course, she pulled the love card.

“How many girls you been with?” she asked Tony, practically salivating over the question.

“Not many. You could count ‘em on one hand.”

“Can’t you be more specific? You engineers are all about numbers, right?”

“Your question didn’t ask for specifics. Next time, spell it out.”

Akmán won the next round, and guess who he picked? Tony. With a smirk, he asked, “What’s the weirdest place you’ve ever done it?”

Karim grinned. “In a Bakhtiari tent.”

“Oh, come on, man, something more out there!”

“Trust me, dude, for my workshop buddies back in the West, that’s as wild as it gets. They couldn’t top that.”

Everyone cracked up. Leila won the next round:

“Did you hook up before you got married?”

“Nope.”

“I don’t mean with your wife.”

“Oh, that’s two questions, sis. You gotta wait for the next round.”

In their language, “brother-in-law” or “sister-in-law” only refers to the spouses of actual siblings, so what we’d call a brother-in-law in the West is just a “brother” here.

Anyway, Leila won again—she was on a roll—and she wasn’t holding back:

“Have you been with anyone besides your wife?”

“Sorry, not answering that one.”

“Why not?” she snapped. “It’s the rules!”

“Same rules say you gotta stick to the card’s theme. Didn’t you see it?”

Leila glanced at the card on the *sofreh*—the tablecloth they’d eaten on—and frowned.

“Guess you gotta ask about work…”

Everyone laughed.

The rounds kept going, and finally, Leila got the love card she was gunning for, and Tony had to answer.

“Yeah.”

“With whom?”

“That’s two questions, sis. Sorry!”

Leila was killing it, winning almost every round, and love kept coming up. She locked eyes with Tony, and Aisha finally had enough:

“What, you’re not gonna ask me or your husband anything?”

“Why? I already know your answers. Come on, Karim, hit me with it.”

“You want me to say who…”

“Nah, I don’t really care about that. I probably wouldn’t know her anyway. Answer this instead: name a woman who, for you, means… disappointment.”

Tony didn’t answer right away, and Leila made it easier:

“Just the first letter.”

Leila wasn’t messing around. But Tony beat her to it:

“Judith.”

“Why?”

“That’s two questions,” he shot back, though the “why” didn’t matter much. Leila was probably hoping he’d say her sister’s name, or at least her first letter. Still, she played it cool, keeping up her curious act instead of looking jealous, and went for it again when she could.

“Who’s Judith?”

“An ex-girlfriend.”

“Why’d you break up with her?” she asked, bending the rules again.

“Who said *I* broke up with *her*?”

“‘Cause no one in their right mind would dump a guy like you,” she said, bold as hell, right in front of her husband.

“Maybe she wasn’t in her right mind.”

Leila stared, dying for more details, but her luck ran out. Now it was the others’ turn to win.

In one round, the *work* card came up, and Akmán asked Tony, “Name a coworker who let you down.”

He was probably fishing for himself, since he’d recently started at the workshop.

Tony started to answer but stopped.

“What were you gonna say?” they asked.

“I was gonna say Ivan, a guy from my former shop. He really let me down back in the day, but now I’m not so sure.”

“Why?” Leila asked.

Tony made a face and didn’t answer, but Aisha gave her sister a look like, *I’ll tell you later*—though she wasn’t about to without her husband’s permission.

Then the family card came up, and Tony won. Leila had been coming at him hard, so he turned the tables:

“Which sister do you hate the most?”

“Aisha,” Leila said without missing a beat, dead serious. Everyone stared, and then she burst out laughing. “Kidding! It’s Amira. Both start with ‘A,’” she said, backtracking. “Your wife knows why, if you’re curious.”

Truth is, their other sister wasn’t much to look at and kinda came off as clueless. Hate’s a strong word, but Leila had to say something.

The game went on, and as the timer was winding down, Aisha finally got to ask a love question:

“Who’s the love of your life?”

She almost asked Tony, just to mess with her sister, but curiosity got the better of her and she asked Leila instead. Leila gave Tony a flirty look and said, “It’s Akmán.”

Time ran out.

“Another round?” Leila, the question-hungry beast, pushed.

“Nah,” Karim said. “Right, Akmán? We gotta get up early for the shop… and you’ve got some *duties* to take care of.”

Akmán nodded, half reluctant, half resigned, and the newlyweds got up to leave.

Once they were gone, Tony tucked in little Nasser, who was fast asleep in a corner of the tent, and started undressing. Aisha did the same.

They put out the lamp, got under the blankets, and snuggled up like always. Then Aisha dropped it:

“Karim, you never told me about Judith.”

“Nope. And I’m not gonna now,” he said, pulling away.

“Was she the one who paid for my surgery?”

Her wife’s intuition was scary good sometimes. She’d inherited a bit of that family gift, though it wasn’t as strong in her.

“Yeah, it was her.”

“Why’d she do it? Not ‘cause she’s some saint, like you told my mom, right?”

“Nope. Not for that.”

“Then why?”

“‘Cause I asked her to.”

“That’s it?”

“Yeah. She did it ‘cause I asked. It was what I wanted.”

“Karim, I’m crazy jealous just thinking about another woman having you before me.”

“Jealous? Don’t be. The past is dead to me. All I care about it is my parents and maybe my engineering degree. Comes in handy at work sometimes.”

A cold, heavy silence followed. They kept their distance. After a bit, he added, “The past is gone, and the guy who lived it? That wasn’t me. That was some dude named Tony, with a cop for a dad, who’s also gone.”

Karim wasn’t feeling great. Damn Leila had dragged up the past, and he wanted to leave it behind. Aisha wasn’t thrilled either. Under the guise of the game, her nosy sister had dug up

stuff she'd never ask outright. Worse, even though Leila was married to Akmán, she was still clearly into Tony. That was obvious, even if he didn't seem to notice.

That tension was hitting them now. They'd been lying there, naked, for a while, but hadn't touched or said the sweet things they usually did every night.

Whatever, Aisha thought. I'm the one who got him, not her. And with a big, satisfied smile and a deep need, she turned to her husband to break the ice:

"Karim, hold me tight and make love to me. I need you tonight more than ever."

Ahmet

The vehicle was a total mess, a real tough fix. It was an old cart, patched up a million times—okay, maybe not a million, but close. The owner needed it bad, like, *life-or-death* bad. It was how he made a living, hauling goats between the city and nearby villages.

The guy had come all the way from beyond Susa, ‘cause this mechanic’s rep was solid in the whole region. He could work miracles with engines, and a miracle was exactly what was needed today.

The owner looked worried as hell. He was barely past thirty but already had seven kids, a few of whom he’d brought along, and they were running wild around the shop.

“It’s a Japanese brand, and the parts gotta be imported,” Tony said. “If they even still make ‘em. I’d have to order from Susa, and they’d get ‘em from Japan.”

“How long would that take?”

“Two months, minimum. Maybe three.”

The guy looked crushed, almost in tears.

Akmán was there too. Ever since he got to Persia, he’d been Tony’s best bud and had been his right-hand man at the shop for a while.

“Karim,” Akmán chimed in, “couldn’t we just make the part ourselves?”

“Make a catalytic converter?”

“Why not?”

“For one, it needs platinum, and I don’t have any. Plus, it’s a high-melt material, and we don’t have the setup for that here.”

“What about a junkyard?” the owner asked, clinging to his last hope.

“The thing with platinum parts is they *disappear*. It’s valuable, so people strip the converters to sell before the car even hits the junkyard.”

“I see.”

“Still,” Tony said, “we could try. Maybe we’ll find something in Oman or Kuwait. They’re close, so it wouldn’t take as long.”

“Please,” the guy begged.

Just then, a kid tugged at Tony’s sleeve. Probably one of the owner’s kids, who’d been a pain all morning. But nope—it was one of his nephews, a son of one of Aisha’s older sisters, who’d raced down from the village.

“Abdul! What’re you doing here?”

“Ka… Ka… Karim!” the kid stammered, out of breath. “Ahmet! Ahmet!”

“Ahmet?”

“He’s… he’s… here! He’s… b-blond! Like you!”

That was the day my second grandson was born, not long after the first. Tony’s face lit up, and he yanked off his gloves, ready to race to the village to meet his son. The client congratulated him, and Tony wanted to do something for him.

“Akmán,” he said to Aisha’s brother-in-law, “start calling the usual junkyards. If they don’t have it, I’ll reach out to Kuwait or Doha. This one’s on me,” he told the client. “You brought me luck!”

Then he scooped Abdul onto his motorcycle, and they sped off to the hills.

When he got there, the baby was already nursing from his mom, who looked radiant despite just going through labor.

Irnma wasn’t feeling well and couldn’t be there for her daughter, but other women from the clan, who knew their stuff, stepped in.

Tony had wanted to take Aisha to a clinic in Susa, but it all happened too fast. His son was born right there, in a tent, which was pretty normal for them. Nobody had the cash for the hospital.

But Tony was starting to make decent money from his work, even with all the medical bills for Aisha, which were piling up. Her health had improved during the pregnancy, but two years later, the disease was creeping back.

Little Ahmet was a total cutie: a chubby, rosy-cheeked kid, blond as his dad, just like Abdul had said. Tony kissed his wife first, then the baby, and noticed what they already knew: the disease was getting worse. Aisha’s right arm couldn’t hold the baby to nurse. Leila, of all people, was helping with that. She wasn’t Aisha’s favorite sister, but she wasn’t complaining like the others, who were all married and busy with their own lives.

Faith

“Mushir, I don’t have faith.”

Karim was so immersed in his tribe’s culture that he was beginning to question fundamental truths.

“Faith, you say? Who has it?”

“You have it. My mother has it.”

The man let out one of his characteristic hearty laughs and replied:

“My son, faith is a feeling you acquire through will. It’s like a mountain sparrow. Do you know them?”

“Yes, like the ones in the Zagros Mountains.”

“Exactly. If you try to catch them, you’ll never succeed. No matter how hard you try, they’ll always fly away. But take a nap and place a breadcrumb in your hand. The bird will come to eat it and become your friend. It’ll approach without fear. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Mushir. But I don’t know if I’ll ever get that bird to come near me. Honestly, I don’t think I’ll ever have that feeling.”

“Then why did you become a Muslim?”

“Because I love Aisha,” he answered without hesitation.

The old man smiled and placed a hand on his shoulder.

“A noble and honest reason, my son. But do you know what?”

“What, Mushir?”

“Those who wait for miracles to have faith are mistaken. Instead, have faith, and then you’ll see miracles.”

The boy looked at the ground for a moment before asking:

“How can I have faith to see those miracles?”

“Search, Karim, search… search and don’t give up. Keep searching… He who seeks, finds.”

Tony searched and searched, but the only thing he found was the love of his wife, which, far from diminishing after having children—as happens to many women—grew even stronger.

“Karim, don’t you love me anymore?”

“Aisha, my soul, light of my heart, why do you say that?”

“You don’t look at me like you used to, you don’t desire me like before, you don’t seek me out like before… Why don’t we make love every day anymore?”

They were lying on the soft bed of cushions and goatskins they had arranged on the tent’s floor, and indeed, Tony seemed distant. He stared at the tent’s ceiling, his head resting on

one arm, lost in thought. The woman tenderly embraced her husband, urging him to make love.

“Aisha, my sweetheart, your health is fragile. We shouldn’t…”

She ignored his comment and continued her caresses.

“Karim, my health suffers when you don’t look at me, when you don’t desire me, when you avoid me. Love me, please!”

Tony smiled at his wife and kissed her, beginning to caress her in return.

“Do you remember what I told you when we got married?” she asked.

“You told me many things, my sweetheart.”

“I told you I wanted to have many children, Karim. I wanted to have many of your children!”

“Yes, but…”

“And I still want that, my husband! True happiness lies in family. Don’t you remember?”

“Yes, my love, of course I remember! But I’m not sure if that’s what’s best for you. We already have two children, your health is delicate, and…”

At that moment, she pulled back slightly and gazed thoughtfully at the tent’s ceiling. After a pause, she said:

“I often think about how unhappy the women in your homeland must be.”

“They are, my sweetheart. They’re full of frustrations.”

“It makes sense. It’s so sad, Karim, that a woman’s life is just about working and then coming home to stare at images on a screen. Don’t they miss having children?”

“No, my sweetness. They’ve been taught to hate them.”

The poor girl was horrified when she heard her husband describe the chilling lives of Western women. He continued:

“They hate marriage, and they hate children. Only a few have them, and at most, just one.”

“I’ll never understand it, my love. Don’t they want to love and be loved?”

He shrugged and added:

“No, they don’t want to love. They’ve been educated to hate.”

“It’s strange, my husband, that they hate and despise children when I’ve spent my whole life longing to have them.”

“Really, my sweetness?”

“When I saw my older sisters and cousins get pregnant, I saw the happiness on their faces, the joy in their hearts, filled with delight and hope at the thought of soon meeting their children. And I thought I’d never have that! No one would marry me because of my

disability. And yet," she added, "Allah, blessed be His holy name, has given me the best of husbands! The most wonderful of men!"

"Aisha, my love!" They kissed.

"But before I met you, Karim, I was afraid. So afraid! I feared that when my last sister got married and my parents passed away, I'd be alone my whole life, never having borne a single fruit. And thanks to you, I now have two beautiful children who fill my life, who will care for me in my old age, and who will bring me joy with their children, my grandchildren."

"Aisha, my sweetheart, how I wish I didn't have to work so I could fill your life even more!"

"I know, my husband, I know. But that's how things are. In truth," she continued, "what can a woman or a man take to the grave if not the satisfaction of having had children?"

"The people in my homeland replace them with trips."

"Yes, you told me. But those voyages, no matter how satisfying, will mean nothing at the moment of death. They'll vanish as if they never existed; they'll fade away like darkness at dawn; they'll be lost, like tears in the rain."

The girl had somehow inherited her mother's poetic gifts and used them to speak a profound truth.

"Aisha, my sweetheart!" Tony was in awe of such wisdom and said, "Until I was 23, I spent my whole life studying. I can calculate the strength of every material on the face of the earth. I can solve the most difficult engineering problems and the most complex mathematical equations. And yet, I admit I know nothing compared to your natural wisdom."

They embraced and kissed, lingering for a while in that position they loved so much, skin with skin, feeling the beat of each other's hearts.

"Do you now understand why I want to keep having children, Karim?"

"Yes, my love. Now I understand."

"But it's not just that, my sweetheart. Haven't you noticed that every time I'm pregnant, my illness recedes? It only progresses when I'm not. Isn't that true?"

"That's true," he acknowledged.

"The more children I have, the longer I can stay by your side."

"Aisha, my sweetheart, don't say that! You'll always be by my side. Do you hear me? We have to grow old together. Do you understand? I couldn't bear to lose you."

She smiled and leaned up slightly, fixing her gaze on his with that unique look that melted him, those large almond-shaped eyes the color of chrysoberyl.

“I couldn’t bear it either, my husband. That’s why I want you to remember what I said when we got married. I told you I wanted to have many of your children! Remember that! Always remember that!”

They both smiled, embraced, and kissed passionately. He ended by saying:

“I won’t give you a reason to have to remind me again.”

A Necessary Help

It was true that during her pregnancies, the progression of her illness seemed to halt, even regress. But it was only temporary. In reality, the disease continued to advance, despite the improvements brought by the pregnancies, and poor Aisha no longer had the strength in her arm to hold the baby while breastfeeding.

To make matters worse, her mother had fallen ill with a heart condition. She began to suffer from chronic fatigue and could barely take a few steps without feeling as exhausted as if she'd run a marathon.

As for Aisha's sisters, they soon had children of their own, leaving the poor girl with no one to help her raise hers.

That's what made me decide to do something I'd been considering for a while. Like Tony years before, I fled the land of my birth to be where I was most needed.

Because my daughters didn't need me at all. Their indifference toward me was absolute.

The eldest, Vicky, was about to graduate from the academy and would soon be a professional soldier. She could fend for herself. And as for Angie… They took her custody away from me after the accusation, deeming me a bad influence on the girl. They took her the same day they arrested Victor! She couldn't even attend her father's funeral.

As a result, my youngest daughter was completely indoctrinated, and over the years, she became a radicalized feminist kamikaze. She hated men even more than her sister and resented me for being a "collaborator," when it should have been me who was resentful toward her and everything she stood for.

But the final straw came from my work at the courthouse.

Until then, my job as a judicial assistant didn't involve judging, as I wasn't a judge, but rather processing complaints. And you can imagine what some of those complaints about "sexual assaults" were like. From staring at a woman's breasts at a bus stop longer than prudence allows, to "objectifying" a woman by complimenting her beauty. That was the delusional, crazy society we were living in. And mind you, dismissing those complaints wasn't breaking any laws. Because, as it turns out, if a woman said those same compliments about another woman, oh, what a coincidence, they weren't assaults but flattery. And so, under the supposed equality of rights still proclaimed by the Constitution and non-discrimination based on gender, the real injustice would have been to convict some and not others.

For a long time, my seniority should have earned me a promotion to judge. But because it was rumored I was a Christian, I was condemned to ostracism. If I'd been a man, they would have jailed me outright, but as a woman, I merely needed "reeducation." But then the higher echelons of the judiciary changed, and probably without realizing what they were doing, they promoted all of us who were due.

I'd already made plenty of enemies as a judicial assistant, but when I became a judge, I earned the rest.

As long as I didn't touch cases involving the Regime's dogmas, everything went smoothly. The problem came when I had to judge a man accused of "rape."

First, a clarification. If any woman accused a man of that—and by rape, they included staring at certain parts of a woman's anatomy for more than a second—he'd go straight to jail. In practice, this didn't always happen because women, deep down, had more sense than our leaders. But the law certainly allowed it, and many took advantage of that loophole to blackmail men for other things.

In reality, the cases that went to trial were those where the victim and the aggressor didn't know each other. So, what needed to be proven wasn't whether there had been a rape but whether those two people had been in the same place at the time the victim claimed. Because otherwise, it was as easy as saying some famous person "raped me," and they'd be in jail.

I got a case involving a relatively well-known man, and it couldn't be proven that he was where he supposedly "raped" the victim. In fact, there were witness testimonies saying they were with him when the alleged incident occurred. That alone was enough to acquit him, logically, since the presumption of innocence is a fundamental pillar of the rule of law. But there were also other inconsistencies and shocking details that led me to believe the woman was acting out of pure spite, having been rejected by the man.

I acquitted him, as was logical, but a rival who didn't get promoted because she wasn't as senior used the case to discredit me, arguing that the witnesses were men, so their testimony was invalid (!).

In the end, I was accused of being a collaborator, and my boss, before they came for her head, asked for mine. I found myself jobless, with a long-lost younger daughter and an older one who had her own life and didn't need me. What was left for me, then, but to go help my daughter-in-law?

Indeed, Persia was a Muslim country, but although Christians weren't exactly welcomed there, at least they weren't jailed, and they were allowed to hold masses as long as they didn't draw too much attention.

It was my third trip to Susa, after the two previous ones to meet my grandchildren, and like Tony, I never returned to my country. Of course, I didn't have to go through the ordeal he did when he first arrived. On the contrary, he picked me up at the airport in a somewhat beat-up car—though the mechanic was inside, just in case.

When I reunited with Aisha, I saw her with her usual cheerfulness. I expected to find a more downcast girl, as the issue with her arm was new and threatened to spread to the other. But nothing could be further from the truth. Although she needed help from a third person to hold the baby while breastfeeding—that third person was me from then on—it didn't dampen the happiness of that joyful, vibrant woman.

Aisha, despite her illness, was the happiest wife on earth, with a husband who loved her and whom she adored, and two children who filled her life with the greatest fulfillment.

Indeed, watching her breastfeed my grandson, I thought about what my daughters were missing, chasing futile, empty pleasures that led only to unhappiness, loneliness, and bitterness.

It was the same with the relationship Tony had with Judith, if you could even call it a relationship. A mere transactional connection that objectified them both, using each other as tools for empty pleasure devoid of love.

In this regard, comparing Judith to Aisha, someone might say my son took both to the seventh or eighth heaven, just as Victor did for me so many times. But if I weren't his mother and had to put myself in the place of one of them, I know exactly which one I wouldn't choose, if only because Aisha enjoyed Tony in a far more intense way.

When I arrived in Susa, I stayed in his bachelor tent, which was being used as a storage space at the time. It was a small home he built shortly after arriving there. Mushir, with whom he initially shared lodging, snored like a truck and frequently got up to urinate. The poor boy, used to sleeping alone, wasn't getting good nights' sleep, so he built his own tent, which was now mine.

The community welcomed me wonderfully, living up to the famous Bakhtiari hospitality. It was a united community where the women were happy, sang, laughed, and shared their gossip. A place where the unhappiness and bitterness so typical of Western women, who only have their pets to vent their frustrations to, didn't exist.

I felt integrated almost from the first moment. They accepted me right away, and I felt like one of them despite not speaking the language, which I gradually learned over time.

To do so, I started with the songs, sung every night, and once I learned them, I was just another voice in that sublime choir, even though mine wasn’t as remarkable.

Akmán, Aisha’s brother-in-law, often played the *setar*, and another friend played the *ney*, and with the women’s choruses and clapping, they created wonderful music. Every night was a concert, and I was part of the orchestra!

They were happy times, missing only Victor to make them complete. A fulfillment my son did have with his new family, despite the difficulties and his wife’s fragile health.

Happiness that, unfortunately, were about to come to an end… and because of the usual culprits.

Recruitment

It was midnight. I heard a child crying outside and stepped out of my tent. Tony was holding little Ahmet in his arms, gazing into the distance at the starry sky. When he noticed my presence, he barely turned. He said:

“Aisha isn’t feeling well, and the boy was crying.”

“It’s cold, son. You should go back inside.”

“When he falls asleep, I’ll go in.”

I rubbed his back and kissed the child, and then we stood in silence for a few minutes. The night was quiet, with only the faint sounds of some goats stirring in their pen and the soft rustle of the wind brushing through the bushes.

“Are you going tomorrow?” I asked. There was no need to specify what.

“Yes, Mom. Tomorrow I’ll report. All the men in our tribe are going.”

“All of them?”

“And almost all the men from the village. Only a few old men will stay here with the women and children.”

I expected as much. There had been a lot of talk about it that afternoon, with mixed opinions. Still, I knew this would happen—that all the young men would leave. He continued:

“You’ll have to leave the hills and move to the village. It’s safer.”

“You’re not on the census,” I pointed out. “You wouldn’t have to go.”

“I’d go even if I were lame and one-armed, Mom. They already drove me out of my homeland once, and I won’t let them do it again here.”

“I know, but…”

“I won’t let them castrate my children! Do you understand?”

“Yes, Tony, I understand.” In truth, I didn’t fully understand. “And what does Aisha think?”

“She doesn’t want me to go.”

“And you’re going anyway.”

“Yes.”

“But what do you know about weapons?” I objected. “When did you ever care for them?”

It was a desperate, last-ditch effort from a terribly worried mother to dissuade a brave man. And it didn’t work.

“I don’t know about weapons, and I never cared for them. But what I lack in knowledge, I make up for with heart.”

The War

Yes, there was a war. All our men left to fight, and suddenly, the women stopped singing and laughing.

The enemy's excuse for the invasion was to "liberate" Persian women from "patriarchal oppression." Women who didn't want to be liberated from anything except the ideological propaganda the West was subjecting them to. But that was just a pretext; in reality, the invaders wanted to seize the country's mineral resources.

The West, with its technological superiority, defeated our army in less than a month. But our president refused to surrender, and before they could kill him, he managed to take refuge in a neighboring country, from where he organized the resistance against the governor imposed by the enemy.

First, they occupied the cities. It was the easiest, given the organized power structures and police forces at the invaders' disposal. The city of Susa held out just long enough, but the city hall surrendered as soon as tanks rolled into the main square. One by one, all the country's cities fell, and local governors were installed.

The surviving remnants of the army were disbanded, but the soldiers refused to dissolve. Those men, along with their officers, took refuge in the mountains to organize the Resistance.

But they were few and poorly equipped, and the president, from abroad, called on the entire population to resist and support them with whatever means they could—human or material.

That's why all our men left. To join the Resistance.

Fortunately, there was much help from the usual countries opposed to the West, in the form of high-tech military equipment. Without those weapons, any resistance would have been impossible.

Once they seized power, the Inquisition didn't take long to appear. They began implementing their hateful policies, separating families. They took women from their children, who were sent to schools for indoctrination, and put the mothers to work. The propaganda of lies took effect, launching a massive brainwashing campaign, just as it had in the West decades earlier.

As in the West, the strategy was the same: control the education system and, of course, the media, flooding the networks with their ideological garbage. Indeed, alongside the physical bombardment, there was a massive barrage of the usual ultra-feminist slogans rooted in hatred of men, simply for being men.

But they did it poorly. In the West, it was a meticulous, gradual process, and by the time we realized it, people like Elle were in power. Here, they were in a hurry and didn't account for the resistance of a people whose women had no intention of losing their way of life, their traditions, or, worst of all, being separated from their families.

Ironically, here, “collaborators” referred to women who worked with the invaders, as it should be—as it was when the term was coined a century ago during the German invasion of France in World War II.

While the enemy had little trouble establishing control in the cities where the people suffered greatly, they didn’t have it so easy in the villages. With no centralized authority or police, the eunuchs and Inquisition agents rarely showed their faces, though we heard echoes of what was happening in Susa, threatening to spread to us.

Indeed, we weren’t suffering as much as they were. We had our goats, which provided meat, milk, and cheese, so we didn’t go hungry like those in the cities. Still, we faced all sorts of hardships, unable to trade with anyone or get gasoline for electric motors. Fuel was almost exclusively reserved for the vehicles resisting the enemy, as that was the priority. Our lives depended on it.

And those vehicles were, as expected, mostly motorcycles.

At first glance, Persian men stood little chance against a professional army with advanced technology. But guerrilla warfare, since the days of the Romans, has always been an effective strategy. Back then, swift waves of riders would raid enemy camps and retreat quickly before the invaders could organize. In the 21st century, there were no horses, but there were motorcycles, which played the same role.

Motorcycles are the modern equivalent of horses, and just as Persian riders once outmaneuvered the Roman Empire with their skill in riding and shooting arrows or throwing spears while guiding their mounts, today’s Persian riders, trained by navigating dusty paths laden with heavy loads, were equally capable of doing the same with their steel steeds.

The Convoy

Ox: a castrated bull. An animal with strength but none of its boldness.

“Did you know they’ve already started castrating people in Susa?”

“Yes, Mushir told me.”

Akmán and Karim had enlisted that very day, just like almost all the men in our tribe. Inseparable friends since Tony arrived in Persia, they were also brothers-in-law, as their wives, Aisha and Leila, were sisters. The rest of Irnma and Efrem’s sons-in-law had also enlisted, though at that moment, only Amira’s husband, another brother-in-law, was with them, trailing slightly behind.

The two marched together as always, laden with equipment. Akmán carried a bazooka, two grenade launchers, a machine gun, and several small bombs in a backpack. Karim hauled a mortar, two rifles, a machete, and some rockets. Their motorcycles were loaded to the brim, moving slowly, powered by a small electric motor with limited range that forced them to travel at a low speed. The enemy column was nearby, and using the gasoline engine could alert them with its noise. They wouldn’t start the engines until they were right on top of the enemy.

Their comrades marched close by, also grouped in pairs. That was the typical guerrilla structure: four pairs formed a squad led by a sergeant, four squads a platoon led by a lieutenant, and four platoons a company led by a captain.

But that was only at the beginning. Over time, as casualties mounted—and they grew increasingly numerous—the structures dwindled. By now, many months after the war began, the third company of Susa was down to just over forty men, when it had once been three times that size.

“I don’t understand how you weren’t castrated as a child, Karim.”

“My parents prevented it. There are still some normal people in the West, though they’re fewer every day. The thing is, war speeds things up. It dehumanizes people.”

“As soon as they reach a village, the first thing they do is castrate the guerrillas’ children.”

“They won’t castrate mine. I’m not on the census, and neither are they. Damn censuses… It’s all about controlling people and stripping away their freedom.”

“I’m not on the census either. But that won’t stop them from castrating your kids, Karim. They have your features… They’re unmistakable in the tribe.”

“They won’t castrate them if I can help it.”

“They won’t touch mine either.”

“Yours?”

“Didn’t I tell you? Leila’s pregnant again!”

“Oh, that’s great news!” They set down some of their equipment and hugged. Until then, Akmán had only one child from his marriage to Aisha’s sister. “You must be thrilled, right?”

“Very. And she’s even more excited. She’s always wanted lots of children, and marrying me gave her some assurance in that regard.”

“Why’s that?”

“Well, we’re nine siblings, and…”

“Oh, right.”

“Plus, our parents are close friends, and since most of us are boys and Efrem only has daughters…”

“Oh, I see. That’s why our older sisters-in-law married two of your brothers, right?”

“Exactly. The truth is, our father-in-law agreed with my father that he’d give Leila to me in marriage when she came of age.”

“Oh! Well… it took a bit, didn’t it?”

“The problem was you showed up, Karim, and the woman who’s now my wife only had eyes for you.”

“Really?”

“You didn’t know?”

“Honestly, I didn’t notice… I only had eyes for Aisha…”

They both laughed.

“Anyway,” Tony continued, “if your father and hers had already arranged the marriage…”

“Yeah, but Efrem never makes those decisions without consulting his daughters first. Once you chose Aisha, I had a clear shot.”

“Well, I didn’t really have to choose anyone. I mean, I chose my wife the moment I saw her.”

“Yeah, something similar happened to me with Leila. We’ve always been together, playing as kids. I always wanted to marry her, Karim. She’s the most beautiful of all Efrem’s daughters.”

Tony gave him a serious look, and the young man realized his slip.

“Along with Aisha, I mean,” he clarified. “They’re both equally beautiful.”

“Yes, that’s true. Though it’s a different kind of beauty. As they say in my homeland, you could say Leila is more attractive, but Aisha is prettier.”

“Isn’t that the same thing?”

“Well, there’s a slight difference… which, out of respect for you and your wife, I can’t and shouldn’t comment on.”

“I see. I appreciate your respect, Karim, and I think I know what you mean. To settle it, we could agree that Amira, our sister-in-law, is a mix of both.”

“You think so?” Tony asked, surprised.

“Yeah. Now that her husband can’t hear us,” he glanced back, “I’m sure you’d agree she’s not as attractive as Leila or as pretty as Aisha.”

They both burst out laughing and slapped each other on the back. Indeed, the girl they were talking about was the least attractive of Irnma’s daughters and the last to marry.

At that moment, the lieutenant ordered a halt. The enemy column had been spotted, and the men positioned themselves on a small rise to get a clear view of it.

It was a line nearly half a kilometer long, made up of trucks, artillery pieces, some vehicles, and men on foot.

They were crossing Gedrosia, a relentless desert of rocks and sand—the same one Alexander, the greatest conqueror of all time, had crossed three hundred years before Christ was born. The legendary conqueror suffered heavy losses there, and the eunuchs were about to suffer the same in a matter of minutes.

“Alright,” the captain began. “The goal is to destroy all the trucks, most of the vehicles, and as many oxen as we can. We’re few. Very few. But surprise is on our side, and of course, Allah’s help.”

“Forward,” the lieutenant ordered. “You know what to do.”

Indeed, they did. They’d done it many times before. They set up the rocket launchers on the ground, securing them firmly, then calibrated the lasers. They did the same with the mortars and grenade launchers. They grouped behind a rocky outcrop, covering everything with tarps the color of the sand so the oxen wouldn’t spot them when they came into range.

The column advanced slowly. The eunuchs were exhausted, their faces showing they’d been sent to fight a war that wasn’t theirs. They too, were victims of the ruthless feminist dictatorship threatening to end the world as it was known.

But they were guilty nonetheless. No one forced them to enlist in the army, and there in Gedrosia they faced the same fate as Alexander the Great’s soldiers.

Once they were in range, the tarps fell, and the lasers targeted the trucks, guiding a rocket to each one with precision. In less than five seconds, every truck carrying eunuchs or supplies was ablaze, while the vehicles began breaking formation, scattering in all directions.

“Fire!” the lieutenant ordered, and the mortars unleashed their clusters of bombs and grenades, aiming to obliterate what remained of the column.

“Forward!” the captain shouted. “Don’t leave a single one!”

At that moment, the riders mounted their steel steeds and charged down the hill at full speed to finish off the few survivors left after the rain of fire that had fallen on the oxen.

When they arrived, the poor eunuchs, still dazed, began taking bullets from the motorcyclists emerging through the smoke, flames, and fire.

That was the hardest part of the battle. A hellish spectacle of hand-to-hand combat where rifles, pistols, knives, or machetes—anything—was used indiscriminately to take each other out.

Akmán and Karim, always together, fought back-to-back, covering each other, until the chaos of the fray forced them to separate and fight individually.

The eunuch Tony faced was a tall man, as tall as he was. Neither had rifles or pistols left, their ammunition spent, so the fight was hand-to-hand. The man was bold and clearly well-trained. He managed to disarm Karim of his machete, leaving him with only a shorter knife.

They sized each other up, adrenaline and sweat pouring from every pore.

The soldier swung the machete at Karim's body, who dodged it with some difficulty. Karim used the swing's momentum to try stabbing with his knife, but the eunuch had the reflexes to evade the thrust. Back to square one.

Fierce fighting spread across the plain, with gunfire and the occasional grenade still echoing here and there. It was hell, where death could claim anyone at any moment.

The eunuch launched a furious attack, machete raised, determined to finish off the guerrilla facing him.

"You're going to die, you damn chauvinist!" he screamed, completely unhinged, his eyes burning with rage.

But Karim stayed calm. He too had been well-trained and had survived such encounters before. He waited patiently, and when the eunuch was upon him, he feinted, dodged the machete, and struck the soldier's arm from below, forcing him to drop the weapon. With his other hand, Karim gripped the knife and plunged it into the eunuch's ribs, eliciting a sharp cry of pain.

"Now you're singing, eh, castrati!"

The soldier collapsed, his face twisted in agony, and Karim pounced, driving the knife into his heart.

"This is for my father, you son of a bitch!" he spat as the eunuch lay dying.

The battle was over, and the guerrillas finished off the few remaining survivors. Karim stood, still panting, and took in the scene—a hellish spectacle of blood, fire, mangled bodies, and fallen comrades.

Had he become a murderer? he wondered.

No. He was only defending his land and his family. He didn’t want his children or grandchildren to end up living in a totalitarian dictatorship like the one afflicting the West, where there were superior and inferior people.

Akmán approached, and they embraced. The young man had some wounds but wore a calm, serene expression.

They surveyed the scene and counted their dead. Someone said:

“There’s not a single woman among the oxen.”

“They don’t dare come,” Karim replied. “Their whole lives wanting to do what men do, but when it comes to war, they don’t show up. They send their castrati.”

“Lest they get raped, for real!” someone said, and a few laughed.

“We don’t rape women,” the captain snapped at the speaker. “Not for real, not for show. Is that clear?”

And it was true. The guerrillas didn’t rape anyone. Only the enemy’s high command was exclusively women, who were respected when taken prisoner.

Yes, there were exceptions, as in all things, especially in a war environment. But the rule was strictly followed, with the death penalty for violations.

In the West, however, those rare cases were portrayed as widespread, and the propaganda incited the masses to keep supporting the war. For now, it was working.

Leila

It’s incredible how naive men can be and how much less perceptive they are compared to us women.

As always after a battle, Tony couldn’t sleep. The extreme adrenaline rush and the horrors he’d witnessed kept him from finding rest.

Yet, this time, it wasn’t the images of combat that haunted him that night but others, stemming from the conversation he’d had with Akmán just before the attack.

In truth, he’d never imagined Leila had been interested in him…

The two had been friends almost from the day he arrived in the village, yet Akmán had never shared such a confidence until that moment. Why now? he wondered. The answer was obvious: the war.

Indeed, one day you’re alive, and in a matter of hours or minutes, you could be dead. Your life can hinge on a tenth of a second—the time it takes your comrade to realize you’re in danger. Nothing binds two people more than that, and the bonds forged by a soldier in such extreme circumstances are stronger even than family ties or blood. Your comrade is everything to you; he’s like your other self, your own conscience, and you don’t hide anything from yourself.

That conversation had helped him piece together some things about his sister-in-law and Akmán’s wife. He connected the dots and recalled what happened one morning when he went to pick up Akmán at his tent.

According to Islamic customs, a woman must dress modestly, meaning she should cover her head and not show any part of her body, except in the presence of family members. A brother-in-law is on the edge of what’s considered family, and whether modesty rules apply depends on the circumstances.

The thing is, Leila never wore a *rusari*, the headscarf, in his presence, though she did with other brothers-in-law. Moreover, what happened one morning before the war was quite telling.

Tony used to rise early and open the workshop in the village at dawn, while Akmán, his assistant, arrived much later. The reason was that Akmán still balanced his shepherd duties with his apprentice mechanic work, needing to milk the goats and feed them before heading to the village. But the day before, his motorcycle had broken down, so he had to go with Tony first thing to pick up the part needed to fix it. It was the time when he’d just married Leila, and the delights of marriage were taking a toll on this man. He’d slept little that night and, as they say, overslept.

Since he was late, Tony went to his tent to hurry him along, but Akmán wasn’t there. He was probably at the latrines, and Leila greeted him, barely making any effort to cover her near-nakedness.

That could have been an isolated incident, except now other moments came to mind—like how she wouldn't stop staring at him during the nights when the two couples had dinner together. And not just that she stared, but the way she did it. Like the day they played *woku*. All clues confirming what Akmán had told him that morning.

For further confirmation, he also recalled the day of their wedding. It was a few months after his own, and Efrem had no money left for the banquet after spending so much on Aisha's. Akmán's father had to cover it, and it certainly wasn't as lavish as Tony's.

When the guests danced with the bride and it was Tony's turn, she said:

"*To nemi khasti ba man ezdavaj kony ve man ba Akmán.*" [You didn't want to marry me, so I had to marry Akmán.]

Amid the music and the banquet's clamor, Tony didn't hear her clearly and thought she said:

"*Akmán nemi khast ba man ezdavaj kand ve ezdavaj kardam.*" [Akmán didn't want to marry me, so he had to.]

"*Chara chenin shod?*" [Why did that happen?] he asked, confused.

"*Shma mi danid chara. Man motmaena npargoz an ra dark nakardam.*" [You'd know why. I certainly never understood it,] Leila replied, smiling.

Tony didn't quite grasp what she meant and didn't think much of it. It wasn't the time to dig deeper, so he let it go. But now he remembered it, along with her exact words. Still, she seemed happy that day, and the groom even more so. Despite preferring to have married Karim, Leila ended up enjoying the wedding.

Aisha always knew her sister had feelings for Tony, practically from the day they both met him. And from the moment Aisha married him, the relationship between the sisters changed. Leila was clearly resentful and treated her sister with indifference, though she never did so with Karim.

The truth is, she envied her, always considering herself superior to her sister in every way. She never understood why a man like Tony chose to marry a disabled woman over her, despite all her attempts to seduce him.

To top it off, her father spent nearly all his savings on Aisha's wedding, making hers with Akmán far more modest. Even so, Aisha gave her her magnificent wedding dress, as they had similar builds, and that brought the sisters a bit closer.

Finally, everything changed when Ahmet, the blond boy, was born, and Leila developed a special fondness for her favorite nephew. From then on, she also started helping Aisha with the kids, as Aisha's condition worsened. That is, until Leila had her own children, and naturally, she focused on them. That's when I had to step in to help the poor girl, which is why I moved to Persia.

Yes, in the end, Muslim women are like any other women, and, as is natural everywhere except the West, they're drawn to handsome men. Leila was especially drawn to Tony, and

in fact, she still was, despite being married to the love of her life. A man she also loved, as one thing doesn't preclude the other.

In any case, Akmán could rest easy. He was Tony's best friend, his workshop partner, and now his comrade in war, which creates a deep bond. He was his wife's brother-in-law, and Tony would never betray him. Not least because he wasn't attracted to Leila.

Yes, you could say she was a stunning woman, and Tony knew it well because he'd seen her up close, and not just that one time. She was an exuberant woman with pronounced hips and breathtaking curves, an explosive woman who would've been a sensation in the Western world thirty years ago.

But, in the mysteries of sexual attraction, she didn't draw him, even though he met her almost at the same time as Aisha, the day he ate with the whole family in Efrem's tent.

Besides, there was an even more important reason he wasn't interested in Leila: Tony was still deeply in love with his wife, despite all her limitations. Limitations that, by the way, were growing worse by the day.

The War Advances

Tony never liked weapons, but he had to learn to use them at a breakneck pace. To his surprise, he discovered he wasn't a bad shot—deep down, he took after his father—and his innate skill at riding motorcycles, as a true champion, made him a formidable opponent.

Indeed, nothing was more devastating to the eunuchs than a surprise attack by 40 or 50 motorcyclists charging at full speed into their camps, relentlessly firing bursts of machine-gun fire. With one hand on the handlebars and the other wielding a pistol, submachine gun, or tossing grenades, it was catastrophic—and something they couldn't replicate due to their own lack of skill.

The toughest targets were assigned to Tony, as he could hit them with precision even on rugged terrain. His comrades saw him as a hero, and no attack's success was complete without him. He was an indispensable soldier, and not just for that. Besides fighting, he spent day and part of the night repairing motorcycles, as breakdowns were frequent, as one might expect.

Moreover, his interactions with people across the country quickly led him to speak and understand Farsi, the dominant language of Persia, from which all other local languages are related to varying degrees.

The war pressed on relentlessly, and Tony traveled the country participating in numerous operations. Some were lost, others won. Many men from our clan died. But at least it showed the enemy that conquering a country isn't so easy—especially if they also aim to destroy families and change their hearts.

Truly, the strength of a nation lies in its children and families. Without them, there's no future, and our people were well aware of that.

Truce

The enemy found fiercer adversaries in our men than they had expected. Operations like the one in Gedrosia multiplied across the country, and the West dialed back the intensity of the fighting as part of a strategy to reassess their approach. This allowed some men to return home and reunite with their families.

That night, Tony couldn't sleep. The war had caused him insomnia, as in all the months of combat he hadn't managed to rest for more than four hours at a stretch. Sleep was caught in bits and pieces throughout the day, stealing moments here and there to regain strength while crossing the desert or waiting for an enemy column to arrive.

Night had always been the best time for attacks, as the enemy's surveillance and detection systems were less effective then. Night was when they advanced and struck, which was why, even though he was in his tent with his wife and children, he couldn't sleep.

The tent had been repaired a few months earlier after a storm destroyed much of the camp. The goatskins he'd sewn together years ago were now torn, and the most damaged ones had been replaced with less suitable ones. Typically, they were cut into rectangles to fit together better, but the women of the tribe, left alone with their children during that time, had enough on their plates raising them. We did what we could to rebuild those homes, so some skins didn't fit well.

He noticed one in particular, oddly shaped—a sort of inverted triangle, or rather a trapezoid with one side cut short. It reminded him vividly of an abstract painting Judith had in her bedroom, and that brought back memories of the past.

He recalled that day in the workshop, the morning after meeting that wealthy businesswoman. He remembered the feelings he had that morning, but above all, his astonishment at something so strange happening to him. Little did he imagine back then, while fixing cars, that life had far stranger things in store.

In those days, he never could've imagined, for instance, that he'd soon become a Muslim or speak a language completely unintelligible to Westerners. And most astonishing of all, that he'd fight in a war, killing many men and some women, many with his own hands. If someone had told him, if they'd sworn it on the holiest of oaths, he never would've believed it.

But it was true. As true as the fact that he was there, on the other side of the world, sleeping on the floor of a tent, with a stunningly beautiful woman lying naked on his chest, while two little ones—his children—slept soundly a couple of meters away.

A woman who hadn't lost her splendid figure despite giving birth twice and who seemed to be having a nightmare at that moment. As if sensing he could be taken from her at any time, she clung tightly to him until she woke up.

"My love, my sweetheart, I don't want you to go back! Stay here with me!"

"Aisha, my love! I love you more than anything, and that's why I must go back."

“Oh! Why, my husband? Why!”

“I have to stop the enemy from destroying our family, our tribe, and our traditions, my sweetheart. If we let them, they’ll end everything. They’ll end me, and they’ll condemn you and our children to misery.”

“If they end you, I’ll already be the unhappiest woman on earth, my love. Not even my children could ease my sorrow…”

They kissed and embraced, remaining silent for a few minutes, feeling the beat of each other’s hearts.

“You must be strong, Aisha… You already are! You’re an incredible woman!”

“My strength comes from yours, Karim. Without you, I’d already be dead, you know that. You’ve always been my guardian angel. Even before we met!”

“And I always will be, my love. I promise you those monsters won’t get me, and our children won’t be subjected to their dictatorship.” He smiled to reassure her as he sat up.

She felt somewhat comforted and got up to drink some water, but she was still uneasy. Some of her sisters’ husbands and many young men from the tribe had already died in combat, and the clan was decimated.

“What will they do to us, Karim, if they get here?”

“They won’t get here.”

“But what if they do?”

“If they did, I’d already be dead. Then they’d take our children, castrate them, and brainwash them…”

“Oh, no…!”

“…And you’d never be able to have more, because they wouldn’t let you remarry. Then they’d separate you from your family, put you to work in a supermarket, and…”

“Oh, Karim! Don’t let that happen! Don’t let any of it happen!”

He caressed her and held her close, showering her with kisses.

“I won’t let it happen, my love. We won’t let it happen.”

The Tanks

In the second phase of the war, the enemy adopted a different approach. While they initially focused on capturing cities and consolidating their control, the relentless guerrilla attacks were making things very difficult for them. So, they decided to target the villages, which were the strongholds and bases from which the guerrilla strikes originated.

The Western press, always manipulative and eager to justify the invasion, constantly fueled the war effort, framing it as a mission to liberate Muslim women from systematic rape by their husbands. But there were also courageous journalists who exposed the atrocities committed by the castrati, such as when they razed our neighboring village. Images of women and children burned by bombs awakened many consciences, but it still wasn't enough. And worst of all, our village was next.

Indeed, the eunuchs were going to bombard our village. *Our* village!

A village where we all now lived after another storm completely destroyed the camp, leaving us with neither the will nor the strength to rebuild again.

The enemy had detected the presence of guerrillas here and intended to leave no stone unturned, no head on shoulders.

And they weren't wrong: our village, like many others, was a guerrilla stronghold. Tony's squad, for instance, was based here—or rather, it was supplied from here, as their actual base was in the mountains.

To make matters worse, we couldn't escape or evacuate the village. All the roads were cut off, and patrols were in place to prevent any flight. Our neighbors had tried and were massacred, with the few survivors taken to a concentration camp where the first thing they did was castrate their children.

But our men weren't going to stand idly by. They wouldn't watch helplessly as the eunuchs killed us all.

The night before the attack, they were underground to avoid detection by enemy satellites. They had adapted a dry aquifer into a subterranean hideout.

The enemy's attack was supposed to involve drones, but the truck carrying them had been intercepted and destroyed by another guerrilla squad. But they still had tanks, just as deadly as those flying machines, and now the task was to destroy them if they wanted to save us all.

The situation was critical because the limpet mines placed under the tanks hadn't been activated. A child small enough to be mistaken for a desert animal by the detectors had risked his life to place them under the tanks. It was the only way, as his small size made him pass for a local fox, avoiding triggering the sensors. However, the enemy had changed the inhibitor code, rendering it operational again. The bombs couldn't be activated remotely, so a far riskier and more difficult action was needed to save our lives.

The lieutenant leading Tony's section stood in the center of the cave, next to an improvised table, showing a map to the captain and the other officers. The soldiers were there too.

"Comrades," the captain began, "the enemy has activated a shield that prevents us from destroying their tanks with rockets or grenades launched from mortars. Until we receive the new hypersonic rockets from our allies, I'm afraid we can't disable them from a distance. We must undertake a lightning strike and launch the bombs from close range, at low altitude. Lieutenant, can you explain your plan?"

"Yes, Captain," he cleared his throat and began. "The enemy camp is at the base of Neftu Hill. The east, the natural access route, is impossible, as is the south. They're heavily defended. In the north, there's the hill, which makes a quick attack impossible before they kill us all."

"Why?" the captain asked. He was a battle-hardened man but new to the area and unfamiliar with it. He wasn't the beloved captain of Susa's third company, who had recently died in combat.

"The problem is the motorcycles can't access it, sir."

"And what about the west?"

"Yes, that's the only viable attack route. It's a rugged area but suitable for motorcycles, with the Lebón Ravine in the center. That's where the enemy tanks are positioned."

The captain studied the 3D map on the table and shook his head, a gesture the lieutenant noticed.

"Sir, those tanks will destroy our village tomorrow. The only way to stop the attack is if someone gets close enough to lob grenades at them from low altitude."

"Yes, that's what I said, but…"

"I propose two simultaneous waves of motorcycles. One from the north flank of the ravine, the other from the south. The two groups will meet in the middle, halfway through, and escape through there after throwing the grenades."

"No."

"Why?" the lieutenant asked. "What's the problem, sir?"

"The problem is the south flank is heavily defended, as you yourself said. They have automatic firing systems there, and anything that approaches will be gunned down mercilessly. We wouldn't even get close."

"Then we'll have to enter solely from the north or northwest flank. Here," he pointed to a relatively flat spot on the map. "Their defenses are on rougher terrain there, and they don't have a firing angle. Plus, their soldiers' tents are in that area, so they'd risk shooting their own men if they fired. They had no choice but to set up there because of the mines planted by the Fifth Division."

“Right, but what about the ravine? How do we cross it? If we have to go down and then climb up to reach the south side, by the time we get there, they’ll fry us, and we’ll only have disabled half the tanks. The rest will still destroy the village.”

The lieutenant fell silent. His superior was right. Unable to attack from both flanks, they wouldn’t have time to disable all the tanks, leaving those on the other side intact.

At that moment, a voice rose from among the soldiers.

“I could try, Captain!”

It was a tall, sturdy, blond man with a slight Western accent.

“Who are you?” the captain asked.

“He’s a soldier under my command,” the lieutenant said. “A good soldier.”

“And how would you do it?”

Karim approached the table with the 3D map and began explaining his plan.

“I propose entering from the north with other comrades. They’ll throw grenades at the tanks up to the ravine, then descend and escape through that route.”

“And what role would you play?”

“I’d go full speed to try jumping the ravine, and once on the other side, I’d take out the tanks there.”

“What?” The captain was stunned. “Are you crazy? Do you know how wide it is?”

“Yes, Captain. But I think it’s feasible. My advantage would be speed.”

Everyone murmured, and some shook their heads. Karim continued:

“Once I reach the south side, I’ll throw the grenades at the tanks myself, and before I hit the automatic machine guns, I’ll turn back. I’m hoping the fire and smoke from the burning tanks will keep them from detecting me, giving me time to escape through the ravine.”

“Impossible. You won’t have time. Even if you could jump it, they’d kill you before you finish.”

“Sir, the castrati… I mean, the oxen, are slow and cowardly. By the time they react, most of the work will be done. And if they kill me after I achieve the objective, even if I can’t return, I’ll be satisfied.”

The captain raised his eyebrows and said:

“Soldier, your courage is commendable, and you have my full admiration for it. But you won’t be able to jump the ravine. It’s too wide.”

“I can. I can install a compressor on a large motorcycle to make it go faster. I’m tall and can handle it.”

“A compressor?”

“It’s a device that compresses air and injects it with enough pressure to propel the vehicle at high speed.”

“Like a turbo?”

“Something like that. It’s not used on motorcycles, but here we’ll have no choice.”

“And you know how to install that… to make it work? Could you do it before dawn?”

“Yes. I think I can manage it in time.”

The men murmured, and the captain thought for a moment. Then he said:

“Alright, but jumping the ravine means falling from a great height. Do you think you can control the motorcycle?”

“Sir, I learned to ride motorcycles almost before I could walk. My father taught me, and I won many championships back home. The issue isn’t the ravine—it’s the limited time.”

The captain weighed everything he’d heard but wasn’t entirely convinced, especially since the soldier was undeniably of Western origin. He stepped aside with the lieutenant and asked:

“Lieutenant, is this man trustworthy?”

“He is, Captain. As much as or more than any of us. He’s one of my best men. The oxen did a lot of harm to him in his home country. They killed his father there.”

Though they lowered their voices, Tony overheard and said:

“Captain!” he exclaimed. “Everything I have is in that village. My mother, my wife, and my children are there, and tomorrow they’re going to bomb it. Don’t doubt me!” he snapped defiantly, almost spitting the words, his brow furrowed and his gaze cold as ice.

The lieutenant looked at his superior and nodded. The captain apologized and said:

“Take heart, lad. We’ll pray for your success. May Allah give you strength!”

The female captain

“Captain, there are women and girls in that village.”

The eunuch in charge of the artillery attack voiced his concern about the orders received. Genoveva Mellier stood tall, hands behind her back, observing the preparations outside. She was annoyed by the sergeant’s interruption, especially by what he’d just said. He continued:

“From the satellite images we’ve obtained, we believe there’s not a single man in the entire village. A few boys, at most.”

“To hell with those chauvinists!” she snapped, her eyes blazing with rage. “They use their sex slaves as human shields!”

The West had sent its fiercest, most radicalized women—the elite military officers—who were in charge of operations. However, they weren’t the ones fighting. The eunuchs, the lower ranks, did the dirty work. They were the ones dying in the war.

“Let those whores die!” she continued. “They’re guilty too for upholding the chauvinist state. For not kicking their masters in the ass! For not cutting their balls off when they’re about to penetrate them!”

The man stood impassive, waiting for orders. The woman concluded:

“The attack will not be canceled, Sergeant. We’re going to wipe out those chauvinist, rapist pigs once and for all!”

“But Captain,” he dared to reply, “what tactical objective would we achieve if we don’t kill the men? I remind you, they’re the ones attacking us…”

“What objective…” The woman shot him a withering glare and snapped, “To cut off their supply lines, you damned castrated eunuch! Don’t you get it? We have to stop them from being resupplied!”

The man lowered his eyes and apologized:

“Yes, Captain.” He stepped back. “At your orders, Captain. We’ll proceed with the established plan.”

“I want the bombardment to start at dawn!” she barked. “When the sun rises, not a single stone in that filthy chauvinist village should be left standing! Nothing that smells of men should remain!” she roared, seething with rage. “Nothing that smells of men…”

The Attack

“In position at ground zero. Akmán, how much longer do you need?”

The soldier glanced at his wife brother-in-law, who grimaced. The compressor wasn’t coming together as planned.

“Don’t take too long! Dawn’s almost here!” the lieutenant warned before cutting the communication. Akmán pocketed the walkie-talkie and refocused the flashlight.

They’d been working all night, and the device should’ve already been installed. In fact, they should’ve been at ground zero with the others, ready to start the attack. The rest had arrived, rolling their motorcycles silently without starting the engines, and only these two were missing to begin.

Karim had to dig deep into every engineering formula he’d ever learned, using the most unlikely gadgets to remove a compressor from a car, pressurize air, and mount it onto a motorcycle frame that was definitely not designed for it.

Lacking proper tools, they'd had to improvise several, and Akmán spent the night sawing iron to make levers, seals, and springs, as well as welding all sorts of parts. Meanwhile, Tony calculated capacities, volumes, and pressure adjustments, giving precise instructions on the sizes of each piece. Once the compressor was designed, built, and adapted, all that remained was installing it—which is what they were doing now. But it wasn't going well, as the tools they had were far from ideal for such delicate work.

After a while, Karim said:

"I don't know if this will work, Akmán."

"Can't you test it?"

"It can only be tested in action. When the moment comes, I'll know if it works or not. Come on, let's go."

They rolled their motorcycles to the spot where the others were waiting, moving as fast as the electric motors allowed. They didn’t know the exact time of the eunuchs’ attack, which could happen at any moment. They couldn’t arrive after the castrati started moving, as they’d be unstoppable, and nothing could prevent them from razing the village.

A kilometer before reaching the spot, Tony’s motorcycle stopped.

“Damn it!” he exclaimed.

“What’s wrong?”

“The electric motor’s done. I had to swap it for a smaller one to make room for the compressor… and the battery’s dead.”

“What do we do?” Akmán’s worried face said it all.

“What do you think?”

“Start the gas engine?”

“No, damn it. That’d alert the castrati.”

“Push?”

“You got it. Come on, grab a rope and tow me. Let’s hope your motor holds out for the little that’s left.”

But it didn’t. In the end, they both had to get off and push the motorcycles themselves. Dawn was breaking, and though it was still dark, they’d soon be fully visible.

They ran as fast as they could and arrived exhausted. The lieutenant gave them a couple of minutes to catch their breath as daylight began to creep in, faintly illuminating the silhouettes of the tanks positioned at the edge of the Lebón Ravine.

“You ready, Karim?” the lieutenant asked.

Tony sighed and said:

“I hope so.”

“Forward!” the lieutenant shouted, and all the motorcycles roared to life and surged forward.

In seconds, they reached the camp and began lobbing grenades. First tank, second tank, third tank… the twelve motorcyclists were doing their job well as Karim, faster than the rest, approached the ravine’s edge.

They’d taken out the fourth tank with grenades when an automatic machine gun that shouldn’t have been there opened fire.

Just meters from the edge, Tony flipped the compressor’s lever, and it didn’t work. He couldn’t jump the ravine. Furious, he slammed his fist into the device, triggering ignition, and the motorcycle shot forward. But he’d lost precious meters, forcing him to take a higher

trajectory to clear the gap. As feared, the anti-drone radar detected him, and the machine guns started firing.

These were AI-guided automatic machine guns with predictive targeting, and they'd surely riddle him before he reached the other side. The AI knew his trajectory and speed. It was the end of the mission—and his life.

Then he did the only thing he could: attempt a corkscrew. It would throw off the prediction, and with luck, the bullets wouldn't hit him. He'd done it countless times during his freestyle competition days, but that was years ago. Plus, this wasn't a competition bike, and the compressor's weight on the right side threw off the balance, forcing him to counter with his opposite leg to maintain the center of gravity.

The problem with starting a corkscrew mid-jump without planning it is that the landing would be a few meters short—critical meters he was already tight on. He might not clear the ravine.

Bullets whizzed through the air, some hitting the motorcycle but causing no damage. The corkscrew was sloppy but enough to reach the other side, just centimeters from the edge. Some rocks tumbled into the abyss, but he was safe. He let out a sigh of relief, having reached his target. Now he just had to trust his instincts and gun it to get the rear wheel traction, which he did. He passed each tank, tossing grenades beneath them, which, combined with the limpet mines already in place, obliterated them completely.

One, two, three, four, five… the tanks exploded one by one, and a massive fireball lit up the dawn. A jubilant explosion of cheers also erupted at ground zero as his comrades witnessed the spectacular feat.

The objective was complete; now he just had to get out. The automatic machine guns on the south flank weren't designed to fire at someone already inside and didn't activate, but the guard castrati were now in the area and started shooting. They fired blindly, as the smoke and flames covered the place, but some bullets hit the bike, this time severely damaging the oil tank. The vehicle began smoking, so Tony triggered the compressor again to offset the power loss.

Miraculously, he made it back to ground zero without taking a single shot, though shrapnel from the explosions had embedded in various parts of his skin.

"Where are the others?" he asked. Only two motorcyclists were with the lieutenant, one of whom handed him another bike to replace his wrecked one.

"All dead, Karim. The machine guns mowed them down. You survived thanks to your invention's speed."

"Akmán?"

"Dead too. He died a hero, acting as bait so you wouldn't get hit."

Siege of the Village

The captain was livid when she saw all her tanks destroyed and ordered the patrols surrounding us and the eunuchs under her command to storm the village.

But we weren't going to make it easy for them either. We barricaded all the doors and windows and entrenched ourselves in our homes, awaiting the assault which could come at any moment.

Meanwhile, the four men who survived the attack regrouped with the rest of their comrades and retreated, as guerrillas typically do: strike and fall back. They needed to reorganize and, above all, sleep after such a harrowing night. They never imagined the captain woman would order an assault on the village, especially since her soldiers were artillerymen with no assault experience.

But they hadn't counted on that woman's fury.

With communications jammed by frequency inhibitors, we had no choice but to use traditional methods to alert our men. Little Abdul, Tony's nephew, once again acted as messenger.

Meanwhile, the village organized its resistance. In wartime, every family had hidden weapons for moments like this, and that moment had arrived.

As no men were around, the women and preteen children took the lead, preparing to resist. It couldn't last long, as we were no match for soldiers. Fortunately, they no longer had artillery, but they could break down any door with gunfire.

The only men in the entire clan with us, too old for combat, were Mushir and Efrem. The latter, along with Irnma, went to their daughter Leila's house, ready to defend her and their grandchildren to the death if necessary.

Mushir did the same with Aisha and me. He arrived with an assault rifle and handed me a pistol.

"Do you know how to use it?" he asked.

"Yes. I think so. My husband was a cop, and just from watching him, I suppose I could manage," I stammered, mixing half the words in Bakhtiari.

"I hope it's not necessary, but we must do everything to keep them from touching Aisha or the kids. Understood?"

I nodded, though I still didn't fully grasp the language. But in that moment, no understanding was needed—everything was painfully clear. My hand trembled as I gripped the gun, heavier than I remembered Victor's pistols being.

I was terrified and worried, my heart racing. Aisha wouldn't stop crying, nor would the children, sensing the worst.

Meanwhile, at our men's hideout, the doctor had barely finished extracting shrapnel from the guerrillas' skin—Tony had the most wounds—and disinfecting and bandaging them. They hadn't even closed their eyes to rest after such an intense night when the messenger arrived.

"Ka… Ka… Karim!"

The boy finally reached the camp, and all the guerrillas turned to him.

"Abdul! What are you doing here?"

"The ox… ox… oxen! They're in the village!"

"Let's go!" the captain ordered. "After doing the hardest part, we're not going to let them get the upper hand."

Meanwhile, the castrati were already in the village, breaking into some houses. Mushir kept firing from the window at anything moving in the street, keeping them from entering ours. He'd fought in a war when he was young, and he clearly hadn't forgotten his skills.

Aisha kept crying, and I barely held it together, trying to comfort the terrified children amid the deafening gunfire.

We held out for at least an hour until the worst happened. Two eunuchs reached our door, and one shot Mushir in the throat, killing him instantly in front of us.

Aisha screamed, and so did I. Then more shots rang out outside. The eunuchs were likely trying to force the door, and I had no choice but to stand in front of it, pistol raised, ready to shoot whoever came in.

'Ready' that's a figure of speech. Truth is, I was terrified, my legs, arms, and entire body shaking. My heart pounded so hard it felt like it would burst out of my mouth, and I feared I'd faint just when my daughter-in-law and grandchildren needed me most.

Finally, the door gave way, and a man entered. In the backlight, I couldn't see him clearly. I took a deep breath to steady myself and tried to aim.

"No, Olivia! It's Karim!" Aisha shouted.

It was him. He'd just killed the two eunuchs trying to get in and broke down the door, thinking there were more inside.

"Oh, Tony! We were so scared!" I hugged him.

"Is everyone okay?"

"Not everyone," I pointed to Mushir's body.

He grimaced in pain, then approached Aisha, giving her a tight hug and showering his little ones with kisses. The worst, thank God, was over.

Funerals

It wasn’t difficult for our men to defeat the eunuchs. As expected, they were artillerymen with no real combat experience, and most fled as soon as the guerrillas confronted them. The few who remained were easily overcome, and their captain was evacuated by helicopter along with her officers. We later learned she was demoted for being defeated by “ragged guerrillas.”

Then came the time to bury the dead. The castrati were collected by carts, piled up, and buried in a mass grave in the desert. Next, it was time to tend to our own, which included Akmán and Mushir from our family. In truth, we suffered one more loss: Irnma. The dramatic events of that day were too much for her heart, and she suffered a fatal heart attack a week later.

Our captain offered to hold a joint ceremony for all the fallen, but the women preferred to do it separately for each family. Still, we all gathered at the cemetery, where each group mourned and prayed for their dead.

We all wept inconsolably, but none more than Leila, Akmán’s widow, who had lost her husband, leaving her children fatherless. A week later, both she and Aisha would also mourn their mother, as I mentioned.

Akmán’s death was a devastating blow for Tony, and he grieved as if he’d lost a brother. In fact, in Bakhtiari, the word for “brother-in-law” doesn’t exist; “brother” is used interchangeably for blood brothers and those by marriage.

It was a deeply emotional ceremony. The fallen hero’s brothers carried his body on their shoulders and buried him near other family members. Karim was among them, given his bond with Akmán.

Mushir’s death, meanwhile, sent shockwaves not only through the village but also the surrounding areas. He was a beloved and respected man, and people came from far and wide.

His funeral was the next morning, at dawn. Before sunrise, his nieces washed the body and wrapped it in a white *kafan* shroud, as tradition dictated. Then, the custom required that sons—or in their absence, brothers—carry the body on a stretcher to the cemetery, accompanied by the funeral procession.

Mushir had no biological sons or brothers, but his adopted son and brother-in-law took on those roles. “His brother,” as he always called him.

It was a windy morning, as if the air wanted to sweep away all the evil the eunuchs had brought to our village. Karim and Efrem carried the stretcher on their shoulders, walking from the house to the cemetery as the crowd followed, with the women weeping uncontrollably. Aisha, of all his nieces, took it the hardest, as Leila had no tears left after crying for Akmán.

I walked close to them, pushing Aisha's wheelchair, with little Ahmet in her lap and Nasser, my older grandson, walking beside us.

At the cemetery, the two bearers placed the stretcher beside the grave, and Efrem, now the tribe's leader, prepared to recite the *janazah*, the funeral prayer. It was a moment of great solemnity, disturbed only by the wind and the cries of some children.

Afterward, the closest relatives typically spoke, in order of kinship, and Efrem signaled Tony to say something. He cleared his throat and tried to speak.

"I'm not good at speeches, especially not at a time like this. I don't want my voice to interrupt the prayers, which should be the priority today. I just want to say that Mushir, after I lost my biological father, became a second father to me. The only father I've had since arriving in this land. A father who welcomed me as his true and cherished son, a father I loved, admired, and cherished, as I know he always loved me." His voice broke, but he gathered himself enough to finish:

"The oxen killed my biological father, and yesterday they murdered my other father." A tear escaped. "But I promise you, this won't stand. They'll pay for what they've done."

He couldn't go on. Emotion reduced his voice to a whisper, and he signaled Efrem to continue the ritual as the crowd erupted in cheers and applause. Once they quieted and silence returned, Efrem opened the Quran and recited the final prayers, asking Allah for forgiveness and mercy for the deceased. Then, he and Tony lowered Mushir's body into the grave with two ropes, ensuring his face was oriented toward Mecca.

The shovels began filling the grave with sand, and the weeping intensified. Aisha sobbed for her uncle with such intensity that those around her had to console her as best they could.

Afterward, the crowd dispersed, passing by Efrem and Karim, bowing their heads in respect. The women comforted the nieces, and then a simple headstone was placed on the mound of sand, noting only the deceased's name and date of death.

The wind grew stronger, and a light winter rain began to fall, barely wetting the drought-worn earth.

Once everyone had left, we were the last to go. Tony picked up little Ahmet in his arms and held Nasser's hand with the other, while I pushed Aisha's wheelchair toward home.

When we arrived, we didn't talk much. I went to the kitchen to prepare some food, while Aisha tried to nurse Ahmet to sleep. Her husband held the boy for her, as she no longer had the strength in her arms to support a child who was getting heavier by the day. It was truly a joy to see that rugged, battle-hardened guerrilla, scarred and covered in dried blood, holding his son with such love while sitting behind his wife, embracing and kissing them both. I'll never forget that idyllic image, where brutality blended with tenderness in a unique combination.

We ate in silence, speaking only what was necessary, and my daughter-in-law and the children went to the bedroom to try to sleep, as we'd barely rested the previous night. I

stayed with Tony to clear the table, and after he repaired the door and windows and tidied up a bit, he gathered his weapons and ammunition and headed for the exit, ready to leave.

“You’re leaving already? Can’t you stay a bit longer with us?”

“I’m afraid not,” he replied, head lowered. “I wish I could…”

“Don’t you want to stay and finish treating those wounds?” I pointed to them. He had several from shrapnel impacts on his arms, chest, and neck.

“No. They’re just skin wounds. They’ll heal. I’ve had worse.”

“But if you leave, who’ll protect us now?”

“Mom, it’d do no good for me to stay if they bomb us. There are still plenty of tanks out there we need to neutralize.”

“I know…”

“I’m more useful to you out there than staying here. You take care of Aisha and the kids.”

I hugged him tightly and kissed him.

“But we’ll be close,” he concluded. “We won’t let them bother you again. That, I guarantee.”

Screams

The war continued its relentless march, even though there were fewer and fewer soldiers left on both sides. On our side, casualties were rising, and on theirs, while their military reserves were much larger, the Western press was still doing its job and showing gruesome images on the news every day. More and more voices were demanding an end to the conflict.

With things the way they were, the enemy realized they had to hurry to end the war. And when they understood that attacking villages wasn't the solution, they desperately began to mimic our tactics and became guerrillas themselves. Forming small commando units, they made incursions into the mountains and along the roads, razing villages and killing everything in their path, including animals.

But our guys were hot on their heels and pursued them.

As a result of that heroic action with the tanks, Tony had been promoted to sergeant and promised a medal for his great feat. In the meantime, his mission was now to hunt down those enemy commandos, and they had been tracking one particularly bloody one for a while. They had finally located it in an area west of the Zagros Mountains.

As the guerrilla forces continued to be decimated, the survivors were spread out as best they could, and new companies and platoons were formed and regrouped. At that moment, my son was in command of two of them, totaling about twelve to fourteen men.

"Sergeant, I think we should attack right now. The oxen can't stand this heat and will be easy prey."

In the absence of another non-commissioned officer, a corporal commanded the other platoon, and he was the lieutenant of the expedition. However, he was an overly impulsive man.

"No, Corporal. We'll do it at dusk," Tony said. "Let them get overconfident. They just got to their camp and are checking everything to see if it's as they left it."

The camp was a cluster of tents that must have once housed at least a hundred men, but the casualties had reduced them to much less than half. The ones who had arrived were about twenty eunuchs who had just come from looting a nearby village and would continue to another target the next day.

"At dusk, they'll be ours," the sergeant concluded. "That's when they'll be most tired. We'll attack just as they start to connect the surveillance devices. Now it's our turn to rest."

The sun was no longer on the horizon, though it was still daytime. Before the attack, it was time to perform the *Maghrib*, the sunset prayer. In the absence of a religious leader, the commander had to fill in and lead the prayer. The men used some water to perform the ablution, took out their small prayer mats and knelt, repeatedly bowing and prostrating themselves, as Karim recited the *Surah Fatiha* in each prayer cycle during the recitation of the Quran.

It wasn't more than five or ten minutes, but with that, they had the spiritual drive they needed to face their adversaries.

With things set, the tent housing the enemy's explosives blew up with a thunderous bang, hit by a rocket. The explosion took out almost all the tents around it, leaving the one that seemed largest significantly damaged. Some eunuchs ran everywhere, becoming fodder for the flames, and at that moment, our guys attacked.

Like all skirmishes, it was a fierce fight to the death, like gladiators in ancient Rome. Neither side ever left prisoners alive. That's how radicalized things had become after the truce.

As Tony had said, the castrati were tired and our guys were rested. They cornered them in small groups, and within minutes, they finished them off.

In the melee, there had been a significant scattering of fighters, and the sergeant and two soldiers had strayed the farthest. After taking out five rivals in a rocky area, they now quickly started heading toward the enemy camp to see if they could help their comrades.

However, the fighting had already ended, and they were limited to helping the wounded.

It was at that moment that Tony heard the screams.

It was a woman. The comrades had trapped her in the large tent, and he feared the worst. The war was bringing out the worst instincts in men, and the platoon he had been assigned, while they were very brave soldiers, weren't exactly exemplary.

"What's going on here**?**" he said. The woman was already naked from the waist up, and the men were starting to take out her trousers.

"Get out, now**!**" the sergeant demanded.

The men looked at their superior, reluctant to let go of their prey. But they finally obeyed. The wounded comrades also needed help.

Tony approached the female soldier, who was clearly terrified. To make matters worse, his own appearance was truly intimidating. His face wasn't clearly visible in the backlighting, and he came across as a tall, burly man, dirty with the dust and smoke of battle, and with several belts full of bullets wrapped around his chest and waist.

The woman, who was still on the ground, began to move backward, almost crawling, fearing the worst. But when Tony was almost by her side, she stopped. She stopped and stood up. The two stared at each other, and then she threw herself into his arms to hug him, to which he responded with a cold kiss.

"You want her all to yourself, huh, sergeant**!**" said a guerrilla fighter who hadn't left yet.

Tony turned around and looked at him with a gesture of rage and hatred that froze him in his tracks.

"She's my sister, you idiot**!**"

Indeed, by chance, the two siblings had found each other, at a providential moment for my daughter. As a professional soldier for years, she had always worked in logistics, in offices, but now she was on the front lines.

Finally, the guerrilla fighter went out and left the two of them alone. Vicky hugged him again and said:

"Oh, Tony! This is hell!"

"The hell that you and those like you have caused," he replied, coldly, as he grabbed a blanket from the ground and put it over her to cover that nearly naked body. "Why did you come here? Weren't you in logistics?"

"I volunteered. Women don't have to come, but..."

"Always rebellious. You always liked action."

"Well, I'm a bit like Dad..."

"Don't you dare mention him! Do you hear me?" he threatened with a finger. "Don't you even say his name! You're nothing like him!"

Vicky lowered her eyes. The few skirmishes she had taken part in had marked her, and she looked much older.

"I just got to the front, Tony," she said, crying. "I really didn't think it would be like this..."

"Of course. You 'desk' soldiers think this is a game, like the ones you play at the academy. But this is very real, understand? Very real!"

"Yes, I've noticed," she sobbed, and tried to hug him again, but he rejected her.

"If you had seen the horrors I've seen in the time I've been here..."

"Yes, I can imagine," she replied, shaking her head. "That's why I'm going to quit. Why don't you quit too?"

"Why don't I... Because I can't! Don't you understand?"

"Why? Who's stopping you?"

He looked at her with a cold expression, as if Vicky were still what she had always been, a spoiled child who didn't understand the things in life. And that's what she still was.

"My wife and my children are stopping me, and all the members of my family... They're stopping me!"

"Your family?"

"Yes, my new family! They didn't ask me to come. In fact, my wife begged me not to come. But my conscience is forcing me! Do you understand, you stupid, spoiled Western girl?"

"Yes. I think so," she lowered her eyes again.

"I have to stay here! I have to keep fighting and killing eunuchs and women like you, because if I don't, they'll kill my children and the women in my family, like they've already done in other villages. Do you understand now, Vicky?"

She nodded and put a hand on his shoulder as a sign of affection, while trying to pick up her clothes from the ground to continue getting dressed.

The two siblings slept that night in the same tent, next to the wounded. They spoke little. Despite the hug they gave when they saw each other, they were, after all, enemies, and he was very distant with her. Some guerrilla fighters were muttering.

"What are those men saying, Tony?"

"You know we don't usually take prisoners."

"Are you going to shoot me?" she asked, scared, sitting up a little to look at him.

He didn't answer immediately and took a while to say something. Finally, he sighed and said:

"Tomorrow we have to pass near our village to get supplies. A convoy is scheduled to leave for the port, heading to China."

"To China?"

"Yes. We have to return some containers of... a certain material."

"Right. I understand."

"There, they will give you a *khomeh* and a *sholar-qeri* to make you pass for a Bakhtiari woman. Get dressed in them and adjust the *rusari* well, so it's not too obvious that you have short hair. In any case, since you're a brunette, you'll be more inconspicuous. Don't talk to anyone, don't you dare say anything, and if they ask you, mention my name."

"Tony?"

"No, idiot! My name isn't that anymore!"

"Yes, of course. Sorry."

"Once in China, you'll have to make your own way. Go to the embassy or do whatever you want."

"Yes, thank you."

Vicky began to think about how risky something like that could be, and the dangers of embarking alone with unknown people to a country hostile to the West, and whose language she didn't even understand. Then she said:

"But... instead of that, couldn't I go back to my people? There's a detachment near here..."

Tony looked at her with an expression of giving her a second chance at life, which was truly what he was doing.

"I prefer not to answer that stupid question."

Indeed, it was bad enough that he wasn't shooting her, which was what was done with prisoners and what his men were demanding. Vicky must have understood and didn't talk about the matter again. On the contrary, she tried to win her brother's favor.

"So, you say we'll pass near your village?"

"That's right."

"Can I see Mom and your children?"

"Now you've become sensitive, sis?" he looked at her with eyes as cold as ice. "When have you cared about your nephews?"

"Tony, I swear I'm not who you think..."

"My name is Karim! Did you hear? Karim Abdulacid, son of Mushir, from the tribe of Mushir, of the Bakhtiari of Susa!"

"Yes, To... I mean, Karim."

"That is my name and the name of my people. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Karim," she fell silent and looked at the ground, although she soon recovered. "Well, what I was saying is that I'm not who you think. I haven't killed anyone in this war yet. I've only been at the front for a week! I prepare the equipment, get it ready, do maintenance work. I..."

"Equipment that kills us and destroys our families! Do you think they're only made for parades?"

"Well, yes, but..."

"Shut up!" he yelled. "Shut up at once if you don't want me to hand you over to my men! If you don't want me to regret letting you escape..."

They didn't speak again all night, and the next morning he managed to hand her over to some friends who proceeded to continue with the plan of taking her to China, making her pass for a Bakhtiari.

Even though the war had dehumanized him, the ties of blood were stronger than anything, and he didn't hand his sister over to be shot. Although he did not allow her to see either me or his children. In fact, the war had dehumanized us all.

Consequence

Yes, that's what wars do—they dehumanize people. But we didn't start the war. It was the West and its culture of hate, or rather, its lack of culture, which had even reached the point where two siblings, blood siblings, fought each other.

Vicky discovered the great power of the words "Karim Abdulacid, son of Mushir, of the Bakhtiari of Susa." As if they were magic words, on more than one occasion she had to use them to save her life and get to China safe and sound. Indeed, the great feat with the tanks was told far and wide throughout the country and the army, and everyone wanted to repay the author of such a feat in some way.

But things weren't easy for her there. As soon as she arrived in the great country of the Far East, the Chinese realized she wasn't Persian and accused her of espionage, holding her in jail for two years. They finally released her after confirming what she really was: a stupid, spoiled Western girl who had wanted to play war.

When she returned to her country, she had certainly changed. The experience marked her very deeply; she matured and was no longer the same person she had been before. She didn't renounce radical feminism, because someone born rebellious dies rebellious, but she did soften it. Especially concerning lesbianism. Something must have happened to her in China in that regard, because the fact is that from then on, she had a visceral hatred of all lesbians and, in general, of relationships between women.

What she did do was leave the army and its horrors to become a simple city girl with no more aspirations than to watch a series on a screen and take her pet for a walk. The typical life that all Western women lived, in a world full of lonely people where the family didn't exist.

That encounter between my two children was one of the war last skirmishes. The images of dead girls and women went around the world, and the castrati and their tanks returned the way they had come, without having achieved a single one of their military goals. Guerrilla warfare, once again, had been successful.

Tony had fought tooth and nail for his new land, the country that had taken him in and to which he owed so much, and to preserve the freedom of his clan and his family. The feminist dictatorship with its culture of hate and its horrors would not and did not extend to Persia.

Because the castrati were brave when they were sheltered behind their machines. But when they fought hand-to-hand, they generally fled, especially if they knew that no prisoners were being taken. What did they have to gain if they owned nothing but their own lives? However, the guerrilla fighters had a lot to gain and a reason to fight and to die: their families. Their families and their children, which were something the castrati did not have.

And they couldn't have them because their mothers, abducted by the culture of hate and not of forgiveness, had turned them into what they themselves were in practice: sterile. Except for the one son they had, they had avoided conceiving throughout their lives, and had castrated them like one castrates a pet: so they wouldn't cause problems.

Because evil is sterile by nature, that is, it gives nothing and keeps everything for itself, unlike good which is generous and gives itself and gives life through love.

"Who's stopping you from leaving?" Vicky had asked her brother when he told her about the horrors of war. How could an individualistic person think of anyone other than themselves?

How could someone who had never loved understand what love is?

"What I lack in my head, I have in my heart," Tony had told me when he enlisted. The war showed that the latter is more valuable than the former, because when you fight for love, there are no obstacles that cannot be overcome.

"My mother, my wife, and my children are in that village. Don't doubt my loyalty," Karim had told his captain, and that was the most convincing argument to persuade him. How could anyone risk performing a feat like the one Tony did with the tanks, with bullets whizzing all around him, if they didn't have such a powerful reason as that?

Western society had eliminated love and family, the true supports of life, and the reason people keep going in this cruel world.

And if not, how is it that the suicide rate is much higher in the Western world than in less developed countries? Shouldn't it be the other way around? Shouldn't it be the opposite if the former have a higher standard of living than the latter and suffer fewer hardships? The answer is obvious: they lack a compelling reason to keep going.

And a compelling reason cannot be a hobby, a pet, or a television series. It takes much more to face the hardships of life, which always exist everywhere.

Victor Frankl, an eminent psychoanalyst and survivor of the German concentration camps, said that he who has a reason to live, that is, a "why," can endure any "how." And it's true!

Are we surprised that today's young people don't want to work and only seek hedonism and immediate pleasure? Well, get them married! Marry them and give them a family, and they will have reasons to fight and work, to build prosperous and strong nations, invincible nations.

Flags Held High

It was a very emotional ceremony. A tribute was paid to all who had fallen for the country, and the most diligent soldiers were distinguished with decorations.

The country's president granted Tony citizenship, which he did not yet have. In fact, he was named an honorary citizen and was awarded the *Almharnt Asse* distinction, the highest decoration of the Persian army, which is a recognition that distinguishes him as a **“**hero of the homeland.**”** It was a hereditary title that would pass to his children after his death and would grant him many privileges within Persian society.

It took place in the heart of the capital, under a clear blue sky. On the esplanade of the presidential palace, next to gardens adorned with red and white flowers and the scent of jasmine floating in the air, mixing with the warm desert breeze.

The soldiers were grouped in formation, wearing their immaculate uniforms, their faces showing a mix of emotion and sadness. The war was over, but many of their comrades had died in combat. The national flag waved, standing out against the golden background of the palace, along with those of all the clans that fought for freedom.

The president appeared, a man of distinguished bearing and a firm gaze, who had returned from exile. A leader who had not wanted to give in to the threats made by the powerful women of the West to raze the country.

With a solemn voice, he began to deliver a speech that I did not understand, but you could feel the pride and determination in his words, which resonated with force and emotion.

The medal ceremony began, and the soldiers approached one by one, until it was my Tony's turn.

"Sergeant Karim Abdulacid," the subordinate named him.

"Ah, you're the one with the tanks," the president said, upon confirming he was the blonde guerrilla fighter he had been told about.

Tears came to my eyes when that important man took the medal of honor, a piece of gold and enamel, and placed it on his chest.

"Congratulations, soldier. You have my admiration and that of the entire nation. Let this small recognition serve as a reminder of all the innocent lives that were saved thanks to you."

"Thank you very much, Mr. President. It is an honor for me. I would do it a thousand times again if it guaranteed the freedom of my family, my tribe, and my people."

The man smiled and was filled with pride, then saying to him:

"Please go to the presidential palace and speak with Major Kashemen. He has something to tell you."

They shook hands, and the medal ceremony continued, with the president going on to decorate the next guerrilla fighter. A man who was probably never a soldier, like so many others who participated in that war.

When the ceremony was over, Tony entered the presidential palace, and the guards at the entrance, seeing his decoration, came to attention and let him pass without asking him anything. Everyone honored him as he passed. He asked several people how to find the Major, and one of the officials told him:

"Yes, he is the leader of the *Anûsiya*. They are all gathered in the Grand Hall. They must be waiting for you. Go to the back, and you will find them."

The Grand Hall turned out to be an enormous space where the *Anûsiya* met, that is, the president's royal guard. Although Persia was no longer a kingdom or an empire as it had been in the past, it still preserved some of its most characteristic institutions.

The *Anûsiya* were the elite corps of the army. They were the most diligent and outstanding warriors and were on the same level as the nobility in the ancient Persian empire. It was the great empire that once stretched across half the world, from the Aegean Sea to India.

"Captain Abdulacid! Welcome!" the Major greeted him, as soon as he entered the great hall, while the rest of the military men applauded.

Tony came to attention before his superior and said:

"Thank you, sir. But I am only a sergeant."

"My dear friend!" he exclaimed. "Don't you know that all Anûsiya have the rank of captain?"

"Me, Anûsiya?" he was astonished.

"Of course! You have an excellent combat history. Truly impeccable! How long have you been in the army?"

"Since the beginning of the war, sir." Everyone made a gesture of astonishment.

"Do you know that only one in ten of those who started as guerrillas managed to finish alive?"

Tony raised his eyebrows and said:

"I guess I was lucky..."

"No, my dear friend. Luck doesn't exist, or in any case, you have to look for it. And you have shown extraordinary military skill and ability. All the commanders I have consulted highlight the same thing, in addition to your courage. And as if that weren't enough, the feat with the tanks... Just for such a feat you would deserve to be named Anûsiya!"

The boy was still in awe and just smiled timidly.

"The president has asked me to honor you with all honors, and that is what we are all doing here. You are a more than worthy member, a clear exponent of our brotherhood. Long live our Anûsiya comrade Karim Abdulacid!"

"Long live!" they all shouted in chorus.

"Comrades!" he addressed the rest of the captains. "Let's make a path for the new Anûsiya!"

Then, all the men arranged themselves in two rows, with the Major at the end of the line. Tony advanced down the path thus formed while receiving the praise and acclaim of his new comrades. When he reached the place where the Major was, he gave him the distinctive black turban of the order and handed him the accreditation that distinguished him as a member of that illustrious brotherhood.

"Thank you, sir," he replied, collecting the diploma, still stunned.

"Ah, and don't call me 'sir.' Here we are all friends and comrades. We were anxiously waiting for you to tell us how you did that."

"Yes, please," said one of the Anûsiya.

"Yes, Karim!" said another. "We're dying to hear it! Tell us how you jumped that ravine and destroyed the tanks!"

Faced with so much insistence, Tony began to recount the feat again. All those professional and career military men were amazed, just as his original comrades, most of whom had died, had been at the time.

"What did you feel, Karim, when you saw the great fireball those tanks became?" one asked.

"Joy? Pride?" another asked. "The satisfaction of a job well done?"

"Relief," Tony said, after thinking for a second. "My mother, my wife, and my children were safe. That's what I thought."

Everyone applauded, and Karim continued:

"I want to tell you, comrades, that that feat, as you call it, would not have been possible without the valuable collaboration of my dear friend and brother-in-law Akmán. He was my partner, my comrade in arms. If it hadn't been for him, I would have died that very day, and the goal would not have been achieved. He gave his life for our freedom!"

"Glory to Akmán!" the Major shouted.

"Glory!" they all exclaimed, and then toasted with a glass of *doogh*.

Then, they sang military songs, recited some Surahs from the Quran that praised the courage of the soldiers, and it ended with the Anûsiya anthem:

> Intrepid captains, noble Anûsiya!
> Let's sing to the homeland with strong faith and love.
> Raise our motto: LOYALTY and COURAGE!
> Allah guides us and protects us,
> assists us in everything that happens;

is our best defender, and to our enemies,
harasses and instills terror.
With strength, loyalty, and courage,
Glory to Persia, the army and the king!
We, the Anûsiya, will praise with ardor.
Marching to battle, fighting in every ordeal,
there we will be, working tenaciously,
with wit and skill, with discipline and unity,
with strength and courage, we will fulfill the mission.
In peace, in war, with cold or with heat,
wielding weapons, surpassing the best,
selfless and brave, by tradition and honor.
With strength, loyalty, and courage,
Glory to Persia, the army and the king!
We, the Anûsiya, will praise with ardor.

Everyone applauded and cheered when the anthem concluded, proud to be soldiers and to defend their country.

To finish, after the comrades had left, the Major Kashemen remained alone with Tony and said to him:

"All Anûsiya serve the president in this palace. Also, according to my information, you are an engineer, right?"

"Yes, sir... I mean, comrade."

"Your services will be very useful among us, friend. Come here with your family, Karim."

"I am very grateful, Major... comrade. But I am not the master of my life. I must consult my wife first."

"Naturally. We'll be waiting for you with open arms."

Anûsiya

The ceremony ended, and we all returned to our homes. We went back to doing what we had always done, as if the war had been nothing more than a nightmare, a parenthesis in our lives.

And that's how it was. Suddenly, everything was forgotten. It seemed as if all that time had been nothing but a bad dream, a fleeting event, a small interruption in the life of a family that went back to being the same as it had always been. Tony continued to love his wife and children, and I continued making cheeses and tending to goats, in addition to continuing to help my daughter-in-law and my grandchildren.

In fact, I had never stopped doing all of that, it was just that now I didn't wake up at night, startled every time I heard a bomb explode in the distance.

For her part, Aisha continued to love her children and her husband, although the war had left a tremendous mark on her life. While at the beginning, until the truce, she had accepted the necessity of the fight with resignation, after the attack on the village, with all that it entailed, her way of seeing it all changed. Fear and anguish marked her deeply, with such an imprint that only time could erase it in some way. And that's not to mention that her illness was still progressing, and, in fact, she was getting thinner and thinner.

That's why, when Tony proposed moving to the capital, she wasn't entirely convinced.

"But what would you do exactly? What does an Anûsiya do?"

"In peacetime? I don't think they do much more than just being together in the Grand Hall, with their black turbans, singing anthems and telling war stories. Since they're the president's guard, maybe they parade from time to time, and especially whenever a foreign leader is received. I don't really know."

The young woman became thoughtful, looking at the ground.

"So, is that what you want, my husband? Do you want us to go live in the capital?"

"No, my love. The army was a necessary thing, but I don't have to stay in it."

"Then why?"

"It's for our children, Aisha. If you think they'll have more opportunities there, we could try it."

"Will they?"

"Sure. All Anûsiya have the right to send their children to the best schools, and then those children, when they grow up, will have high positions as officials within the state. Plus, we'll get the best doctors for free, who can continue to better treat your illness."

The woman turned her head. She still wasn't sure. Then she looked at him with a sad expression and said:

"If you think it's what's best for them..."

"I don't think anything, my love. In fact, I was about to tell the Major no when he offered it to me. But, naturally, I had to talk about it with you first."

"Why were you going to say no**?**"

Tony got up and went to the entrance of the tent. His children were outside, running around with their cousins and other children from the village, laughing and jumping non-stop. He stopped for a moment to watch them, and then turned back to his wife.

"Because that would be a kind of life similar to the one I left. A city life, where nobody knows each other, where children don't play with anyone, where they are just locked up at home watching nonsense on a screen. That's why I wanted to say no."

"Our children wouldn't see their cousins again, they would lose their friends..."

"That's right. But it's not just about the children, my love. In fact, I never liked weapons, or the army, or the military. I went to war out of pure necessity. Actually," he continued, "my father or my sister would have been delighted to lead a life like an Anûsiya. Being a high-ranking officer, in an elite corps, with all kinds of privileges... But not me. On the contrary, I'd rather be in a workshop fixing engines."

Aisha smiled and moved toward him, using her hands to push the wheelchair. She embraced him with her arms, and he bent down to kiss her.

"My love, I wouldn't be happy there either. Without my father, without my sisters, without my nephews and nieces, without all the people of our tribe... Alone all day waiting for you to get home..."

"Well, you could meet other women. The wives of my comrades..."

"They aren't my family, Karim. They couldn't love me like they love me. They would make fun of me for my disability."

It was already dusk, and the women were beginning to gather on the veranda. With the end of the war, the concerts and cheerful songs had returned, and the high voices of the young girls were already sounding as they waited for us elders to join them too.

Aisha came out of her tent and sat next to me and the others, while Tony helped her get there.

"Will they take away the Anûsiya title if you don't accept the position?"

"No. We are Anûsiya for life. The position is mine, and I can access it whenever I want."

It was then that we began to sing. We had been rehearsing a beautiful song with several tones that included harmonized voices at different levels, and we were very excited to see how it would sound. It was a beautiful poem that Irnma had composed years ago, which we had put to music. It was titled, "Mountains of Persia."

> In the heart of the silent desert,
> where the sun kisses the golden sand,
> sacred-faced mountains rise,
> with centuries of history tattooed on their skin.
> Their peaks, guardians of the wind and time,
> their shadows, a refuge for ancient dreams,
> where the falcon traces its temple
> and the echo responds with verses.
> Under their shelter, the tent extends,
> home of a lineage of brave blood,
> the family, a root that is never lost,
> like the bond of the date to the harsh sun.
> The father, a wise man with a serene gaze,
> the mother, a well of love and tenderness,
> the children, stars that cross the sand,
> weaving the future with faith and sweetness.
> And in every gesture, in every word,
> lives the spirit of those who have left,
> the hospitality that never ends,
> the fire lit, the bread shared.
> Oh mountains of the Persian desert!
> witnesses of a soul that never tires,
> your silence sings and talks,
> with blood that dances in hope.

Five Against One

He was alone. The eunuchs had cornered him, and he couldn't call any of his comrades for help. The leader of those men watched everything from a certain distance, waiting for her subordinates to finish the job.

But Karim wasn't going to make it easy for them. He scrutinized the four in front of him and saw a sign of fear in the eyes of one of them that was greater than what the other three had. He then made up his mind and attacked the one next to him, easily knocking him to the ground while breaking his neck with a quick motion. As he had expected, the scared one stood still, and with a leg sweep he also took him down, so he was no longer a threat. Indeed, as soon as he got up, he ran and disappeared from the scene.

Only the other two were left, who tried to surround him by placing one in front and one behind.

The three of them sized each other up. The guerrilla fighter looked alternately at one and then the other, trying to figure out which one would attack first. Since none of them had weapons, they had no choice but to use their hands or feet to launch the attack. An attack that, as he expected, began with the one who was more afraid, precisely for that very reason, in an effort to end the situation as soon as possible.

But as soon as he approached, with a feint he managed to keep him from even touching him, and with a tremendous punch to the stomach, he knocked him out of the fight, not to approach him again.

Only the other one was left, the most dangerous one, the most determined to sacrifice his own life to please his leader. The leader… A woman who now looked at him with an impenetrable face, as if she was waiting for the end of the fight to do something unexpected. Did she have a hidden weapon that she would use if her four henchmen failed? Would it be better, perhaps, to attack her first?

He didn't have time to make any decision, as the eunuch in front of him attacked him with determination. This one wasn't as clumsy as the others, and he managed to land a punch on his face that sent him to the ground. He had busted his cheekbone, which now ached and stung in equal measure, while he felt the swelling begin to appear.

The man threw himself to the ground to finish him off, and then a struggle began in which both turned over each other, spinning several times, until finally Karim got on top of him and began to strangle him tightly.

The eunuch was already defeated, but, as he had expected, the woman was not going to stand by impassively. Indeed, she placed herself behind the guerrilla fighter, and with a knife, she severed Karim's neck, who could do nothing but fall to the ground and bleed to death there.

At that moment, she woke up.

She was gasping spasmodically and only caught her breath when she saw her husband next to her, sleeping next to little Ahmet. His blond hair mixed with his father's so she couldn't tell whose strand was whose. There they were, the three of them, occupying a tiny space, feeling the comforting warmth of their bodies in the winter night.

A small oil lamp dimly lit the tent, as the boy needed it to fall asleep. The child also had nightmares that night and had to sleep next to his parents. It was probably because of the fever caused by that cold, which he had also passed on to his mother.

She remembered the last scene of that dream again, and she couldn't help but let out a small cry, which, although soft, woke up her husband.

"Oh, my love!" she hugged him tightly, and he fully woke up.

"Aisha, my sweetheart! You're on fire!"

He got up and went to the small table to get a pill, which he gave her along with a small cup of water. While his wife took it, he grabbed the little one and took him to his own bed without waking him up, and then came back to her.

"Hold me tight, Karim! I'm so cold..."

"It's because of the fever, my sweetheart. You'll be better in a little while." He wrapped his arms around her and held her close.

"We've always slept in each other's arms," she whispered, her face nestled in his neck.

"Yes. Just like we are now."

"Do you know the anguish I felt when I would wake up in the middle of the night, reach out my arm, and not feel you there?"

"Yes, I know, my love. I know."

"I've been very lonely, Karim."

"My mother has been with you all this time."

The young woman fell silent. Of course, you can't compare a mother-in-law to a husband.

"My love!" she exclaimed. "Never leave me!"

"Never, Aisha. I will never abandon you." He held her close.

"Promise me! Please, promise me!"

"I promise you."

"Promise me that if there's another war, you won't leave my side."

"No, I won't leave," he whispered, while kissing her and caressing her hair.

"If we have to die here, the four of us together, we will die, my husband! But we will die together! That way neither of us will have to regret the loss of the other." She began to cry. "Promise me!"

"Yes, my love. I will never leave you alone."

"I couldn't bear to be without you..."

From that day on, they always slept in each other's arms. They had done so before, but now much more. She didn't let go of him all night, as if she had a premonition of the danger that he might be taken from her one day.

Jealousy

She realized that she had let go of him and wasn't hugging him anymore. It was certainly difficult to maintain that position, especially with all the tossing and turning she did every night because of those terrible nightmares. Just now she had had one where, again, she dreamed that he was being taken from her. This time it was a street fight he got involved in, with some thugs taking his life, and again, with the collaboration of a woman.

Could it be a premonition? she wondered. Unlike her mother or her sisters, she didn't usually have them. In fact, she once had a very clear one, back when she feared Karim would marry Leila, where she dreamed that her sister was holding a blond child in her arms. It disheartened her so much that she fervently begged Allah for it not to come true, and He certainly listened to her. Although, come to think of it, blondie Ahmet had been in her sister's arms many times...

While her heart struggled to beat more slowly, she reached out her arm to touch him and hug him again, but she only managed to reach the cushion he was resting on, which, moreover, was already cold. Karim had gotten up, and apparently, he had been gone for a while.

Where could he have gone again? She looked at the clock, and it was four in the morning. Had he gone to the latrines again? she wondered.

Tony could be there, of course, although he didn't usually get up at night, and if he did, it was only once.

Then her heart, which was already calming down a bit, began to beat fast again as she considered another possibility: could he be with her? she wondered.

Since the death of her husband Akmán, that wretched Leila had been stalking him like a cat in heat, and more than once she had surprised them chatting amicably and laughing out loud. Just this afternoon, in fact.

"Were they laughing at me?" she questioned.

Yes. That could be it. When he got up the first time, he found his sister-in-law, and she seduced him. And of course, since Aisha was awake and waiting for him in the tent, it would be too obvious to do it at that moment, and they would have to wait for a more opportune occasion. When she fell asleep, that could be the moment.

But she wasn't going to allow it. She would do whatever it took to prevent it, so she quickly got dressed and put on her *rusari*, sat in her wheelchair, and went outside.

The first thing she did was go to the latrines. Maybe it was all in her imagination and her husband was there, maybe feeling unwell. But no. The light was off. Nobody was there at that moment.

The night wind began to blow with some force, while the moon, in its crescent phase, projected her figure as she advanced, casting a timid shadow. Her heart was beating fast, at a pace of agony, a premonition of the worst. She rounded the corner of the big tent, crossed

the veranda, and now she could see her sister's tent. Her brother-in-law Akmán had set it up before the war on a small mound of earth a few meters away, because when it rained it poured and the runoff would spill right through that area. And that was certainly what had happened a few days ago. A torrent had passed through there, and when it dried up, it had left everything full of sand.

Damn sand, she told herself. The wheelchair had gotten stuck in it, and now she couldn't move forward, already so close to getting there.

At that moment, she heard Leila's voice, and her heart began to beat even faster. She was awake! At this hour of night! Who was she talking to? To Karim, without a doubt. Who else? Nobody was awake in the whole village but the three of them. Yes, it could also be with her children, but that wasn't the tone of voice you use with little ones only a few years old.

Then she heard her laugh, and she couldn't hold back anymore. She threw herself to the ground and began to crawl clumsily toward the entrance, supporting herself mainly with her left arm, since her right was barely of any use anymore, and with her heart beating so fast it seemed like it was going to pop out of her mouth.

Finally, she climbed the small rise, dragging herself, and stopped, gasping, on the verge of collapsing from agony.

Bakhtiari tents don't have doors; If anyone want to enter, is just by pulling back a curtain that covers the entrance. When it's windy, or at night, it's secured to the ground or to the posts that act as a frame with hooks, so it doesn't accidentally open. Nobody who doesn't live in the tent can just enter like that if the curtain is drawn, and courtesy requires you to call the inhabitant by name and they will indicate whether you can enter or not.

But Aisha wasn't going to do any of that. The adulterers were so confident that they hadn't even put on the hooks, so she let herself fall, almost rolling, pushing the curtain, and indeed, there they were, the two of them. They were there, naked, one on top of the other, while her sister's face was distorted with pleasure and ecstasy. They didn't even stop when they saw her come in, and at that moment her heart couldn't take it anymore and it exploded with pain. The heart attack was a thunderbolt, and with a high-pitched scream... she woke up.

"My love, what's wrong? What were you dreaming about this time? We're going to have to tell the doctor, because this isn't normal anymore."

"Nothing's wrong, Karim," she hugged him tightly and kissed him feverishly, almost compulsively, demanding to make love.

"Aisha, my sweetheart, it's very late. It will be dawn soon, and you need to sleep."

"No, my husband. I want to feel that you belong to me, and most of all, that you love me. Prove it to me! Prove it to me, please!"

"Of course I love you, my sweetheart! Why do you doubt it?"

"This afternoon I saw you with Leila, and you were laughing. Were you laughing at me?"

"With Leila? But I haven't seen her in days! Didn't you just dream that?"

"Karim," she replied, ignoring what he had said, "I want you to make love to me passionately while you cover me with kisses, and while you keep telling me all the time that you love me, and that you'll never leave me for any other woman. Tell me!"

"Aisha, my sweetheart, you know I would never do that."

"Tell me again!"

"I'll never go with another."

"Make love to me, Karim." She closed her eyes. "Make love to me... to me..."

Cyrus

"Karim, I don't like how things are going at all. The priest of our parish told us that he probably won't be opening the church again."

Yes, I called him Karim now. I had always resisted doing so and only used his Christian name when we were alone. But he didn't like it, and I had no choice but to adapt.

That day was Sunday, and my son had picked me up in Susa after the day's mass.

Since I arrived in Persia, the only way to fulfill the Sunday obligation was to go to the city, where a small building that had been a dairy had been adapted as a church. There was an ordained priest there who combined his ministry with masonry work and celebrated mass daily, which the few Westerners living in the city attended.

We had always been accepted. Even more so than in our own country, given how things had gotten. The Persians were suspicious of converted Muslims, but not of those of us who had always been Christians.

The problem came because of the embargo. Indeed, since our invaders left, the West placed a fierce embargo on us, as a result of which our country began to suffer from significant economic shortages. And after that, people no longer saw us as before.

Every Sunday I had the same routine. At dawn, Tony would take me to Susa on his motorcycle, and then he would go back to the village to open the workshop. I would stay in the city for the morning and run various errands—for example, buying Aisha's medicines, diapers for the children, or errands that other members of the tribe asked me to do—or I would help the priest with apostolate and catechism work. Afterward, at lunchtime, Tony would pick me up, and we would eat together at his house in the village until, close to dusk, he would close the workshop, and we would return to the hills.

"Why do you say the priest is going to close the church**?**" he asked me.

"Because people know that that store isn't exactly a dairy. Recently, someone broke the windows, and there was graffiti on the wall."

Tony didn't say anything, but he looked sad. This reminded both him and me of what we had already suffered in our own country.

"And what are you going to do**?**"

"I don't know. For now, there won't be any more services for a while. Afterward, we'll probably meet at Cyrus's house."

"That's the guy with the big white beard, right**?**"

"Yes. His wife and he have offered to hold masses there. It's a small house, but we'll manage."

"Will you all fit in there**?**"

"I don't think more than eight or ten of us will meet."

"Yeah, I get it."

The wind was blowing hard, and my *rusari* was moving in all directions, covering my face. When we reached the crossroads that led to our village, Tony accelerated the motorcycle and went straight.

"Aren't we going back to the workshop**?**" I asked, holding onto him tightly. He was going faster and faster.

"No. We're going to the hills."

"Why**?**"

"Aisha isn't feeling well. I opened the workshop this morning because I had to deliver a couple of cars that were in a hurry. And because they were good clients, otherwise..."

"What's wrong with her**?**"

"She doesn't have strength in her fingers, Mom. She fainted this morning before you got here."

"She fainted**?**"

"Yes. I don't know if all those fears she has are because of her illness, which is already affecting her brain."

"Is that possible**?**"

"Yes, Mom. In the advanced stage, it makes them delirious and they even suffer hallucinations."

"Hallucinations**?** What kind**?**"

"About what they fear most."

Of course, I said to myself. Hence the recurring nightmares about something happening to Tony or him leaving with her sister.

"Poor girl. She must be having a hard time."

"She is."

"It's strange," I added. "This morning she was so well... When I arrived, she was the same as always."

"Well, you know how she is."

Yes, we all knew how she was. Never a bad face, never a complaint, never protesting about anything, always smiling... she was an angel**!**

I used to be called "angel face" in not a very friendly way by the boss's gang, a long time ago. But that woman certainly had to be called an angel, because that's what she was. She had the face and body of an angel and always behaved like one.

When we arrived, poor Aisha was lying down, but she tried to sit up as soon as we entered the tent.

"No, please, don't get up for me," I said, spluttering the little Bakhtiari I knew.

She smiled, and Tony helped her sit in the wheelchair.

"Where are the children?" he asked.

"They're with Leila."

With her sister... She never left the children with anyone, and she always had them with her when I wasn't there. She must have been feeling frankly bad.

"How are you feeling?"

"Very well!" she exclaimed. "Oh, Karim, Olivia! I have some very good news for you!"

"But... you were so unwell..."

"That was before, Karim! That was before...! But not anymore!"

"Why not anymore?"

"Look!"

The woman held a reactive strip in front of his eyes and said:

"I'm pregnant!"

Surah 18

Once upon a time, in a very old town, there was a group of brave young people who believed in one God. But the king of that place was cruel and forced everyone to worship stone idols. The young people, with their hearts full of faith, decided not to obey the king, because they knew they should only worship Allah. "We are not afraid!" they said to themselves, even though they knew they could get into trouble.

One day, they fled the town and found a hidden cave in the mountains. It was dark, but they felt safe. Inside, they sat together, prayed, and asked Allah to protect them. They also had a loyal little dog that followed them and stayed with them, guarding the entrance. Then, something magical happened: Allah made the young people and their little dog fall into a deep sleep, as if time had stopped. They slept and slept, while the sun shone outside and the clouds passed.

Many years later, many more than we can count on our fingers, Allah woke them up. The young people opened their eyes and felt hungry, as if they had only slept one night. One of them went out to look for food, but when he arrived at the town, everything was different! The houses, the clothes, the people... Hundreds of years had passed! The people of the town were surprised to hear his story and understood that Allah had cared for them in the cave to show His power. The young people smiled, happy to be safe, and their little dog wagged its tail, happy to be with them.

From that day on, the story of the young people of the cave was told all over the world, reminding us that, if we trust in Allah, He will always care for us, even in the most difficult moments. And so, the children of the village learned to be brave and to have faith, like those young people and their little furry friend.

The father had fallen asleep almost before finishing the story from Surah 18 of the Quran. The day had been exhausting, as he had spent the day at the hospital.

Yes, we had to admit Aisha to the clinic in Susa. For some time now, she hadn't been able to stand, and she was constantly in the wheelchair. But the worst were those strange fainting spells, something completely new, as well as her excessive fears and nightmares. The doctor asked us to leave her under observation to run some tests for twenty-four hours.

When night came, Tony wanted to stay with her, but Aisha insisted on the opposite:

"My love. What will you gain by staying here? These electrodes aren't going to harm me."

"I don't want to leave you alone, my sweetheart."

"But you're willing to leave our children alone?"

"They'll stay with my mother."

"No, Karim. Not at night. They have always been with me, and they will miss me. You are their father, and they will be calm with you."

"Then Olivia will come to be with you."

"No. It's really not necessary," she insisted, and in the end, Tony did what she wanted.

The next morning, very early, we switched roles. I stayed with the kids to give them breakfast and get them ready for the day, and he immediately left for the hospital to pick up Aisha. We were anxious to know the result of those tests.

"Well, you are Anûsiya..." the doctor commented when he saw the report. He was a new doctor, different from the one who had treated them before.

Titles are important in Persia. Just as in the West, for example, Mr. or Ms. or Don or Doña are used, or "sir and ma'am," here there is the designation *aghaye* for men and *khanome* for women. But there are also other designations based on social functions or ranks. For example, Tony was no longer treated as *aghaye*, like any ordinary man, but *Anûsiya*, his new title, and his wife, *khanome Anûsiya*. That's why the doctor, upon reading the test report and reading Aisha's title, knew what her husband was.

"I was also in the war, Captain," the doctor continued.

"Oh yeah? Where?"

"I was in the north, near the Caspian Sea. There I served as a military doctor."

"Ah, good. I was in Gedrosia, and also around this area. I was a guerrilla sergeant."

"Wow!" the man raised his eyebrows. "You must have done something really big to be promoted directly to captain and named Anûsiya..."

"Well, I did what I could, as we all did."

"I agree with you on that. We all did what we could, and we gave the best of ourselves. The best we had. In my case it was medicine, and in yours..."

"My knowledge of mechanics."

"And I suppose courage, because a title like that isn't given to cowards."

"Of course." Tony didn't want to talk about it, as he was anxious to know the test results.

"Well, I'm not going to lie to you, Captain," the man looked back at the reports. "I'm afraid I don't have good news. The medulla oblongata is being affected, and the paralysis will become more and more pronounced. But that's not the worst part." He paused and looked at them.

"What's the worst part, Doctor?" Aisha asked, holding her breath.

"It's very possible that... before getting to that... I mean... before you are completely paralyzed... there will be..." He took a while to answer, but finally blurted it out: "a fatal outcome."

The news hit them like a bomb, and their hearts sank. Their mouths suddenly went dry, and my son, much more than Aisha, was about to faint.

"In how much time?" Tony asked. Both of their faces were a sight to behold.

"I don't know. It could be months, years... who knows. What you can be sure of is that the fainting spells and loss of consciousness will become more and more frequent. We will have to monitor the progress regularly, to see what to expect."

The two looked at each other with tears in their eyes. The blow had been terrible, and Tony felt a fear and anguish unlike anything he had ever felt. Not even in the most tragic moments of the war, a war he experienced firsthand, had he felt so terrified.

After saying goodbye to the doctor, Tony pushed the wheelchair through the hospital corridors and out to the street, where they had the motorcycle parked. He took Aisha in his arms and placed her in the sidecar, and while he folded the chair to put it behind, she began to cry:

"Oh, my love... I'm a cripple! I'm useless... except to give you problems."

"No, my sweetheart. Don't say that! To me, you are everything."

"It's possible that I'll die, Karim. Didn't you hear the doctor?"

"This man isn't your usual doctor, Aisha. He doesn't know that you recover with pregnancies."

"What if this time it's not like that?"

"It will be. I am sure of it." He was also terrified but tried not to seem so to comfort Aisha.

The young woman was not soothed by these words, and she said:

"If I die, Karim, marry Leila. She is also a widow, Akmán's widow, and she can raise our children along with hers. You can have more children with her and..."

"You're not going to die, Aisha. I'm going to keep having many children, but yours. In fact, in six months we're going to have another one, whom you will be able to raise, just as you've done with the others."

"Do you really not regret marrying me, after everything that's happening to me? I'm just a burden to you..."

"Don't say such nonsense, my sweetheart. You will never be a burden."

"Leila is as beautiful as I am, even more, and she is full of health. Besides, I know she likes you. She has always liked you! I was very jealous when you danced with her on our wedding day."

"You were the one who asked me to do it, my sweetheart. Just like when she got married."

"I know." She paused, and then continued. "Do you remember first time we met?"

"Yes, my love."

"Really, Karim, many times I think that if Allah had arranged for it to be Leila and not me who was by that fountain when my father invited you to eat that morning, you would have fallen in love with her and not with me."

"That's silly!"

"No, my love. I was the first of all my sisters you saw. And since we're all equally beautiful... that's why you noticed me. But if it had been Leila, then I would have sighed for you and you wouldn't have returned my feelings, as happened to my sister."

"That's absurd."

"But, unlike her, who immediately married Akmán, I would have been the most unhappy woman on earth. I would have died of jealousy every day. Every time you looked at her, every time you touched her, it would have been as if a dagger were being plunged into my guts."

"I would have never gone with her, my sweetheart."

Aisha didn't listen to what Tony was telling her, and she continued with her own thoughts. A sudden loquacity had come over her that astonished her husband, especially at a time when he himself didn't feel like talking, after what they had just been told.

"Mushir told me a while ago that in some Islamic countries, a man is allowed to have several wives at once. To marry several women, especially if they are widows."

"That's right. To protect them if they have been left helpless."

"Karim, if it were allowed here, if when Akmán was killed you had married Leila, I would have been dead inside from that very day."

"My love, I don't understand you," he stopped. "Then why do you say I should marry her in case you...? Besides, other sisters of yours also became widows because of the war. Why would I have to marry Leila precisely?"

"Because she's the most beautiful of all," she replied. "Oh, Karim, I love you more than my life, and I only want your happiness. And also, since my sister and I look so much alike, so that you would always remember me when you made love to her."

"Aisha, my sweetheart," he smiled, with affection. "I will never marry Leila, and I could give you many reasons for it. But the first and main one is that you're not going to die."

"I'll have to someday."

"And me. Who guarantees that I won't die before you?"

"Oh, no, Karim! Don't say that, even as a joke."

He leaned over to kiss her and continued moving forward. However, she couldn't stop thinking about what the doctor had told her, and above all, she had the real possibility of her death before her. The news had impacted her terribly.

"But, tell me something," she stopped, braking the wheels. "If you had known how far my illness would go before we got married, wouldn't you have chosen her?" I know my father offered her to you.

"No..."

"You're just saying it, Karim. Because you see me at a sad moment. To comfort me."

At that moment, he knelt down to press his face against hers.

"My love, if I had to be born a hundred times again and had to choose my destiny a hundred times, it's possible that I wouldn't choose to be born where I was, or even to have the parents I've had. But I assure you, my sweetheart, that in each and every one of those hundred lives, I would choose to have you as my wife."

"Including my limitations?"

"Including each and every one of your limitations," he affirmed, kissing her. "I am in love with you, Aisha, and your limitations are part of you. You can't love the whole without also loving the parts. Do you understand?"

"Yes, but wouldn't it be better if I didn't have them? Wouldn't you prefer me, but without my limitations, in one of those lives?"

"Of course I would like that! But I don't know if that other woman would still be you..."

"Oh, Karim!" They hugged, and he caressed her.

"My love, do you know why I went to war?"

"So they wouldn't castrate our children, right?"

"No. The reason was much more selfish. The people who came here are specialists in hate. They are specialists in destroying love, and with that, they separate spouses. And I couldn't bear, in any way, for them to separate us. I'd rather be dead than be without you."

A Stone in the Road

That formidable woman recovered quickly from the shock. My third grandchild was still growing inside her, and it certainly seemed that the symptoms of her illness were beginning to subside, albeit slowly. At least she hadn't fainted again, despite the fact that her right arm was no longer of much use and she barely had the strength in her fingers to hold the spoon with which she fed her young son. It was becoming more and more difficult for her to perform any task, and she was always in her wheelchair, if not lying in bed. I was the one who was raising the children and taking care of her, while we waited for the much-desired improvement to begin.

We all had the hope that, just as in the other times, the pregnancy would revitalize her body and she would return to her old self, or almost. That's what had happened the other times, and there was no reason for it to be different now.

But in the meantime, until that formidable organism, full of a desire to live, put all the necessary resources in motion to save her, her many needs had to be attended to.

They had to go back to Susa, to the hospital, to continue monitoring the progress of the disease.

Tony was driving the motorcycle back home, his face sad, because the markers that measured the intensity of her ailments were still not recovering; quite the opposite, in fact. An attitude that, paradoxically, was the opposite of hers. Although she was crying, the young woman did not stop singing inside the sidecar, and it was when they stopped at an intersection that he said to her:

"Aisha, my love... I don't understand you..."

"What don't you understand, my love? Isn't there less time left until we meet our new child? Won't I be like I was before? Do you know that I think this time it's going to be a girl?"

He smiled and kissed her and was about to start moving when he heard screams to his right, in a nearby alley.

It was a group of people, men and women, who were insulting and beating four other people.

"It's Cyrus!" Tony said.

Indeed, his big white beard made him unmistakable. The Christian was walking with his wife and two daughters, probably after having attended mass that day. Since Aisha started to get worse, I had stopped attending those services, as I couldn't leave her alone for a single moment.

The fact is that there again were hatred and evil making themselves present, preying on a family of innocents. Because, paradoxically, we Christians, who are more similar to Muslims than the atheist Westerners, were still being identified with them.

It was when the insults turned into punches and kicks that Tony got off the motorcycle.

"No, Karim! Don't go!" Aisha yelled, but he ignored her.

Like a spring, in two strides he was in the middle of the altercation and began to interpose himself between Cyrus's family and their attackers.

"Hey! Hey! What are you doing? What have these poor people done to you?"

Aisha feared the worst, and the worst happened.

Despite the fact that he was dressed and spoke like any Bakhtiari, because of his eyes, the color of his hair, and especially his accent, they discovered he was a Westerner and attacked him as well. With that, at least he managed to distract their attention from the Christians.

"Get out of here!" he told Cyrus and his family, who didn't take long to leave.

Despite being outnumbered, Tony was a seasoned warrior, a decorated war veteran, and it wasn't difficult for him to get rid of almost all those thugs. He had already left most of them on the ground when a woman, coming from behind, hit him on the back of the neck with a stone...

As a good guerrilla fighter accustomed to hand-to-hand combat in situations of inferiority, he had assessed the situation and ruled out the woman as a threat. And it was logical. He had enough to do not to lose sight of any of those who were besieging him.

But that blow was definitive. Aisha let out a scream of terror so loud that everyone turned, and then they saw how that fragile woman in the sidecar of the motorcycle was trying, with great difficulty, to get to him from there.

It was then that they understood what had happened. The blow had been tremendous, and Tony collapsed to the ground in a matter of seconds.

Aisha got out of the motorcycle as best she could and tried to run, but her legs would not let her. She fell to the ground and continued to crawl toward her husband, crying inconsolably, her soul torn, without anyone doing anything to help her. The crowd dispersed when they saw that he was motionless, leaving Aisha there alone, completely destroyed by pain.

This time it wasn't a nightmare like the other times. She begged Allah to take pity on her and wake her up at that moment to put an end to so much pain, but God ignored her. She rubbed her eyes and screamed with all her might, she beat her chest, she shook her husband's face to wake him up, but everything remained the same. His eyes didn't open, and then she confirmed the inevitable and began to cover him with kisses compulsively, without stopping crying and screaming.

The premonition had come true and her worst nightmare had become a reality: a woman had killed him from behind.

Hatred and intolerance claimed two new victims that day; the day the Anûsiya died like a villain, he who had been honored and decorated as a hero of the nation.

The Loss

I lost the two men I loved most, who were my husband and my son, and I had also lost my two daughters in some way. They were incapable of love, for their hearts had dried up. But I still have my grandchildren, the only ones I can have now, since Vicky and Angie underwent sterilization that suppresses the menstrual cycle.

I have talked on numerous occasions with many people about what kind of loss of a loved one is the worst to bear. There are those who believe that the most painful is the one that happens suddenly, after a tragic death, because the survivor has not been able to say goodbye to the person they love. That is truly what happened to me with my husband and my son, and it is certainly very hard to find out something like that, which happens without warning.

Although many times I think that those two deaths could have happened much earlier, since Victor spent his whole life as a police officer, with the risks that entails, and Tony, every time he left our village to fight, I would hug him as if I were never going to see him again.

On the other hand, there are those who think that a slow death is worse, the one that is going to happen inexorably, but that takes days, weeks, or even months to happen.

When Victor was killed, I thought I would never be able to experience such intense pain. I was wrong. Certainly, there is no pain as great as that which a mother feels when she loses a child. I can attest to that. But I can also assure you that the pain Aisha felt was, if anything, as great as mine, or even greater.

Yes, I can say it without any shame. Her life was torn from her, the reason for her existence was taken away.

The blow was tremendous, and she completely sank. Her worst fears, her most exacerbated fears, had come true, and it was like living that horrible nightmare, over and over again. And with the difference that now she couldn't wake up, much less hug the one who was always her comfort on terrible nights, the one who made all her fears vanish.

And as a result of that, she soon fell ill, and seriously.

Well, she was already sick before. Pregnancies revitalized that woman in such a way that not only was the progression of her illness slowed down, but she also improved compared to her previous state. That's what happened with Nasser, her first child, and also with Ahmet, the second. But the damn war had prevented her from getting pregnant with her third much sooner, and that was taking its toll.

The truth is that in that she was a bit like me. In my case, in 26 years of marriage, I never used contraception and only had three children. The first one came right away, but then I had to wait six years to have Vicky, and then seven more until Angie arrived.

Aisha must have been like me, who didn't get pregnant easily. Although it is true that they had not seen each other much during the war, it had already ended, and even so, it took a

while for her to get pregnant. Or maybe the "fault" wasn't hers and it was Tony's, just as, in my case, maybe the cause was Victor.

Yes, that could be it. Because Vicky, being my daughter, should be like me, and she got pregnant on the first try on that fateful day...

Anyway, who knows. In any case, Aisha had worsened a lot in all the time that passed between her second pregnancy and this third one. But we all had the hope that, just like the other times, things would change.

And yet, everything went to ruin with Tony's death.

According to the doctor, the affection of the medulla oblongata had increased because of the grief, and only a new operation to reduce the gland that they had already reduced on a previous occasion could save her. And that was without any guarantee that it would be successful this time.

But we had no choice but to try, with the added inconvenience that, just like the other time, an operation like that was very expensive. And that was the worst of all... because we didn't have any money.

Tony had died, and there was no remedy for that. The pain we had was intense, and both his wife and I were like the living dead. But, while she had completely given up, I had clung to the possibility of saving her as if by doing so I wanted to preserve the last thing I had left of him. Of course, my grandchildren were also there, but I no longer wished to have any more deaths in my family. I had already had enough, and I was not willing, in any way, for her to die too. I was going to do everything at hand, I was going to use all the resources at my disposal, to try to save her.

Visit to the Capital

"I'm afraid it won't be possible, *aghaye* Abdulacid. Captain Anûsiya never enrolled his wife in the health insurance plan."

Efrem and I had gone to the capital, the place where that prestigious force of military men was based, leaving Aisha and the children in Leila's care.

Although winters in our area were mild, as we headed north, we began to feel the bitter cold of winter, which intensified during those days. And even more so if we consider that we were on a motorcycle with a sidecar —Tony's one— and not inside a car.

It was a horrible trip, in which we arrived exhausted, and we stayed at the home of some distant relatives of Mushir.

The idea was for them to treat and operate on Aisha there. As a *khanome* Anûsiya, she had the right, just like her children, to the free medical coverage that this elite corps offered to

all the family members of this noble caste. However, we were encountering an endless number of problems.

Fortunately for me, the man who received us spoke a variant of Farsi, Lurí, which is a language from which Bakhtiari derives as a dialect. That meant that I, roughly speaking, understood what he was saying, in general terms.

"Of course," Efrem replied. "My son-in-law never enrolled his wife because he had no need to. They didn't live here, and in Susa they could pay for the treatments themselves. The captain earned enough with his work."

"Yes, I understand."

"But now he's gone. Do you understand**?**"

"I am very sorry for his death, *aghaye*, but only the Anûsiya can register her."

"Only he**?** I can't believe it..."

"Or his heirs. Does he have children**?**"

"Yes, he does**!**"

"If they authorize it... But they have to be of legal age. Are they**?**"

Both Efrem and I made a gesture of annoyance.

"In his absence, the Anûsiya's father could also do it."

"His father, Mushir Abdulacid, died in the war, *aghaye*."

"Doesn't his mother count**?**" I said.

"Yes, she could. In the absence of male ascendants or descendants, authorization can come from the female branch."

"Well, then I am his mother."

"You**?**" he replied, with an expression of disbelief.

Of course, I thought. I'm a Western woman, with a Western accent... really, I didn't look like the mother of a Persian Anûsiya. But Tony didn't look like one either, and yet, he was.

"Yes, I am his mother," I confirmed. "I am the mother of Captain Anûsiya Karim Abdulacid."

The secretary stared at me, looking like he didn't believe anything.

"You would have to prove it," he told me.

"How**?**"

"By providing your filiation, of course."

"I don't have any of that."

Indeed, it would be useless to show my Western documents, where it stated that I had a son named Tony with Victor's last name, when he was never registered by that name in Persia.

In fact, when he was registered for the first time, he already appeared as Anûsiya Karim Abdulacid.

"*Khanome*, as you can understand, if you cannot prove it, I cannot just believe you are his mother out of nowhere."

"Excuse me?" I didn't understand what he said.

"He doesn't believe you, Olivia," Efrem translated for me, and he continued:

"I want to speak with your superior," he demanded. "With the Major."

"Mr. Kashemen only sees those who are not Anûsiya by appointment."

"Very well, then give me an appointment."

The secretary entered some data into the computer and said:

"March 20th."

"In three months? We can't wait that long! My daughter is dying!" Efrem grabbed him by the lapel. "Don't you understand, you fool?"

"That's enough, Efrem," I held him back. "We won't achieve anything acting like this."

"You have to give us an earlier appointment!" he insisted. "Now!"

"What's going on here?"

A guard had just arrived. It was logical, since in a military institution like that, they were everywhere.

"Nothing is happening," I replied. "We were just leaving."

"*Khanome*," the secretary said. "If you are the mother of the Anûsiya, you only have to prove it, and you can register your daughter-in-law so that she is entitled to healthcare."

"Isn't my word enough? It is the word of the mother of a captain Anûsiya."

"I'm afraid not. With the war, many of them have died, and then 'supposed heirs' have come, pretending to be real. We cannot allow such abuses."

I didn't understand very well what he told me, although it was clear to me that I would have to prove that I was who I said I was.

"Alright. We will prove it."

"And you also have to provide the corresponding documentation for the death of the Anûsiya's father, the minority of his children, and the absence of siblings, if that is the case."

"So, my daughter will die before we can get the first of those documents," Efrem replied.

"I'm sorry. I don't make the rules."

"That's why I was asking to be put through to whoever does! You stupid, heartless secretary!" he yelled, completely out of his mind.

But that only served for the guard, helped by another who arrived, to throw both of us out, with the threat of imprisoning us if we came back.

The truth is, it was a complete frustration to encounter so many difficulties, after the trip we had made. Above all, because Efrem had hoped that the Anûsiya would be more reasonable, as they had a reputation for being true gentlemen. Unfortunately, bureaucracy is present everywhere, and there is no place where it does not hinder all matters.

Once outside, Efrem began to cry, and I said to him:

"Don't worry, we'll get those documents. I'll go to my country's embassy and request..."

"To the embassy**?**" he interrupted me. "Don't you know that Persia has broken diplomatic relations with the West**?**"

I nodded. He was absolutely right. Since the war, and especially now with the embargo, the two countries were suspicious of each other, and there was no possible understanding. There was only a small legation that was solely in charge of trying to repatriate prisoners of war. And incidentally, always under bribery to the official on duty.

"We would have to bribe someone, Olivia**!**" he insisted. "And I have no money left..." he mumbled, while wiping away his tears.

"Don't worry, Efrem," I consoled him. "I'll try to get it. I will get enough money for Aisha to be able to have the operation in Susa, without us having to come to this ungrateful city."

A Warm Welcome

"Come on, Efrem, don't worry. You'll see, we'll get through this."

On the way back home, night fell on us, and we stopped halfway in a Bakhtiari village in the Zagros mountains. The great hospitality of these people was once again demonstrated, and they welcomed us as if we were family.

We told them who we were and where we came from, and they were very saddened when we told them that the great Bakhtiari hero Karim Abdulacid had died, and his wife was in such a bad state. His fame, I would say his legend, had reached there, that of the first Anûsiya Bakhtiari. They comforted us and feasted us as only they knew how.

We had finished dinner and stayed for a moment alone by the fire while our hosts gathered their flocks in the enclosures before we went to sleep.

"I often think it was a mistake to allow Aisha to marry your son. I always feared that something like this could happen. People are so evil..."

"Then why did you do it?" I replied.

"How could I not? She was so in love..."

Efrem looked at the fire, his eyes full of tears, and I reply:

"I didn't think it was a good idea either when he told me. Especially because he wanted to become a Muslim."

Confession for confession, I thought, and he nodded.

"Yes, I understand. It was too radical a change."

"That's right."

We were silent for a moment, and then he said:

"When the war came, many in the tribe thought that Karim wouldn't enlist, because Westerners have a reputation for being cowardly. And yet, he was one of the first to do so," he sighed. "Yes, all those idiots shut up. And even more so when the first wounded began to arrive, telling about the feats your son was performing. I was filled with pride, Olivia," he paused for a moment. "And the best part came when he was decorated and named Anûsiya. Ha!" he exclaimed. "My partner Sazalar was dying of envy..."

"But even so, do you regret having that son-in-law?"

"No. I don't regret it. A man who is capable of risking and giving his very life for what is just deserves all my respect. What father wouldn't want a husband like that for his daughter?" he clarified. "We Bakhtiari admire courage as something only second to our hospitality, and Karim has more than amply demonstrated that he had it."

He was silent for a while, looking at the fire, and added:

"Besides, of all my grandchildren, Nasser and Ahmet are the ones I love the most."

"And they also love you the most," I added, and it was true.

I was certainly a bit confused after his last comments. I didn't quite understand why he had said at the beginning that it was a mistake to allow them to marry. It's possible that I hadn't understood him well, since I still didn't master his language. However, I refrained from asking for more clarification. It was probably both things. He was proud to have had a son-in-law like my son, but he also lamented, of course!, the state Aisha was in, for having been widowed so young. Although, on the other hand, she wasn't the only one of his daughters who was in that situation. Of the six, three were also widows because their husbands had died in the war, and only two had survived, although they had returned in lamentable conditions.

At that moment, our hosts arrived, and Rosarém, the wife of the chief who was hosting us, recited a sublime poem for us:

In the desert, where the sun sets, a poem is composed.
Efrem and Olivia visit us, to find in us what soothes.
They have come from afar, with a grieving soul,
seeking help for Aisha, their very beloved daughter.
That very beloved one, who suffers and needs, with urgency to be healed.
They have traveled to the capital, to try to avoid that very fatal thing.
So that their very beloved daughter, may heal her cruel wound.
Our tents are open, and our humble heart offer them refuge, love and compassion.
Let us pray to Allah the merciful, that He may deign and heal Aisha,
and we are sure of it, as He is so loving.
May He restore her health and revitalize her promptly.
Meanwhile in our camp, they cry and tell us of their lament.
Oh, Allah, grant them your blessing, listen to our prayers,
and may we soon see her healing.
You, grieving parents, persevere in temperance,
do not be so afflicted, and do not lose hope.
May Allah bless Aisha, and grant her health,
grant her the happiness, that she so much deserves.
Trust, friends, in His goodness,
and meanwhile accept here what we give you, friendship.
Efrem and Olivia, do not be sad. May peace and tranquility reign in your heart.
And may Allah with his goodness, take away your affliction.
Always trust in Him!
And you will see how in the end, you will get a sign; she will recover,
and her smile will shine.

Option B

The first thing I did when we got back from the trip was call my daughters. The house in our country was still ours, and the idea was to ask for their consent to mortgage it and apply for a loan to pay for the operation.

The house was in Victor's name, as we bought it thanks to certain advantageous conditions to which members of the police force were entitled. His premature death had prevented him from making a will, and then the property became the ownership of his legal heirs, who were our three children. I could dispose of Tony's share, but the other two-thirds were in the possession of my daughters.

Since I arrived in Persia, you could say that the times I had spoken with them could be counted on the fingers of one hand. It was impossible to call them during the war, as the enemy had cut off all telephony in the conflict areas to prevent guerrilla fighters from communicating with each other. The Westerners could, as they had established a special satellite system, which, logically, was forbidden to the local population.

When the war ended, the networks were gradually restored, although very slowly. Even so, I couldn't know anything about Angie, the youngest, as I had been forbidden to speak with her. And on top of that, Vicky was a prisoner in China, so there was a time when I had no idea how they were doing.

Until, finally, she was released from prison and returned to our house. Fortunately, she kept the phone number I knew, and we were able to talk. Not much, because the lines were terrible and were constantly cutting off, even in the central square of Susa.

But at least, I had been able to re-establish communication with her.

As I said, until that moment, we had talked little. From the little we had talked about, she told me that she had left the army, that is, she was no longer active in the military. She had been discharged for suffering from post-traumatic stress and was barely surviving on a pension that the government gave her for having been a prisoner of war.

Regarding Angie, I had also managed to talk to her, although I had only done so once. My daughter was already of legal age, as she was over sixteen, and had left the "orphanage" where she had lived since they took her from me.

The child—well, she wasn't so much a child anymore—didn't treat me with harshness on that occasion. Of course, I didn't mention anything about the incident by which we were separated. It was an open wound that had to be left to heal on its own, and I had the hope that, as she matured, she would understand what had happened and realize who was right. In fact, on that first occasion I spoke with her, I already noticed some change. Although we didn't mention anything about the matter, I noticed a certain openness on her part. She didn't say anything to me, but I think Angie regretted what had happened, although she accepted it perhaps as something necessary to fulfill her ideals and the mental schema they had instilled in her.

It was a brief conversation, with circumstantial phrases, in which I was the one who asked most of the questions. Questions like, "How are you? How are you doing? What are you doing now...?"

She treated me, you could say, as you would treat a former schoolteacher you haven't seen in many years, and one day you run into her by chance in a shopping mall.

At least, I had gotten her back in some way.

The thing is, now I had to talk to both of them, because I desperately needed to mortgage the house to be able to pay for Aisha's operation.

Two Calls

“Hey, Vicky.”

“Hey, Mom. What’s up?”

I’d hitched a ride to Susa on a trader’s motorcycle. He’d stopped by the village to sell some fabrics, and on his way back, I asked him to give me a lift. He was cool with it.

When we were in the capital, I tried calling Vicky, but the lines were down. Too many people, network overload. So, we headed back home and tried again from Susa. Got there at night, and the next day, I was back to make the call.

The greeting was cold, like we’d just talked an hour ago and had nothing left to say.

“How you doing, Vicky?”

“Eh, fine. Just chilling.”

“Nothing to tell me?”

“Not much.”

“What were you up to?”

“Eating dinner.”

“This late?”

“Mom, it’s nine p.m. here.”

“Oh, right, time difference. So, uh… what’d you do today?” I asked, trying to break the ice. I wasn’t ready to just blurt out what I needed to ask her.

“Today? Nothing. Been in bed pretty much all day.”

“In bed? You sick?”

“Nah. It’s just comfier. So, how you guys holding up with Tony’s death?”

“You can imagine. I’m still a wreck inside. Wake up crying every day, and Aisha… I won’t even get into it.”

“What’s wrong with her?”

“She’s dying, Vicky.”

A short silence, then she asked, “She taking it that bad?”

“She’s taking it awful, like all of us, but it’s worse for her. The grief’s made her illness worse, and the doc says if we want to save her, she needs surgery.”

“Surgery…”

“Yeah, like the one she had before. They gotta shrink that gland again.”

“Well, if that’ll fix it…”

“That’s the kicker, Vicky. They’re not even sure it will.”

“Then why put her through it? No point going under the knife for nothing.”

“Don’t you get it? If she doesn’t, she’ll die for sure!”

“Oh, right…”

“We gotta at least try!” A tear slipped out. “Or do you want her kids to grow up without a mom? They’re your nephews!”

“No, I don’t want that, it’s just…”

“What?”

“That surgery’s gonna cost a fortune, right?”

“That’s why I’m calling, hon.”

“Huh?”

“We need money. A lot of it. And we got nothing.”

“But… wasn’t Tony some kinda… what was it called? Like, a knight or something?”

“Yeah, Anûsiya.”

“Didn’t that come with free healthcare? Doesn’t his widow get it?”

“We tried,” I sighed. “But those benefits were only in the capital, and since they never lived there, they didn’t register. Now they won’t cover Aisha ‘cause we don’t have Tony’s authorization.”

“How could you, if he’s dead?”

“Exactly what I said. And since his heirs are minors, they can’t authorize it either.”

“Isn’t there another way?”

“There is, but the red tape’s insane. You wouldn’t believe it.”

“Ugh, bureaucracy. It’s everywhere.”

“Yup.”

“So what’s the plan?”

“We can’t go that route, Vicky. It’d cost money, and we’d lose too much time. We got no cash, and we got no time. Aisha’s getting worse, and she needs the surgery in Susa, where her records and doctors are. We can’t start over somewhere else.”

“I get it.”

“The thing is, we got no steady income, and the workshop and its stuff won’t even cover the start.”

“I don’t have it either, Mom. You know I’m on a pension, and the army’s pay is crap. Can’t you tap into Tony’s dad’s inheritance?”

“You mean Dad’s savings? Didn’t you know they got wiped out by inflation?”

“Oh, I know! When I got back from China, I went to the bank for my share and nearly laughed my ass off when I saw the balance. No, I meant his other dad. What was his name? He always said he was the son of…”

“Mushir?”

“Yeah, him. He was the head of your tribe, right? He’s gotta have something…”

“Hah! Mushir had nothing. Unless we sell some old books nobody wants…”

“So, what then?”

“I was thinking about mortgaging the house.”

“What house?”

“Our house.”

“The one in the village?”

“No, hon, that’s worthless. I mean the house we all lived in. The one you’re in now.”

“Mortgage… *this* house?”

“Yeah.”

Another long silence on the line. I thought it dropped, but it hadn’t.

“Vicky? Vicky?”

“Yeah, I’m here.”

“So, what do you think?”

“I… I don’t know.”

“It’s the only option, hon. It’s that, or she dies. And I’m done with people dying!” I started crying again. “I’m sick of watching my family die!”

“I get it, Mom, but…”

“But what?”

“If we mortgage the house, they’ll take it for sure.”

“Not necessarily.”

“Oh, really? Who’s gonna pay the loan? Huh? You guys got no steady income, and we sure as hell don’t. And we don’t have family to bail us out anymore.”

“I know, but that’s not the point right now. Saving Aisha is what matters! That’s the real priority!”

I was bawling now, and Vicky softened up. After a few seconds while I tried to pull myself together, she let me vent, then said, “Alright. You got my signature. Worst case, I can move into a veterans’ home. Not as nice, but… what can you do? It’s not like I’m living large.”

I’d been holding my breath and let it all out in a big sigh. Then she added, “But the problem’s gonna be Angie.”

“Angie? Why?”

“I don’t think she’ll wanna leave. You know she doesn’t have a job, and…”

“She still hasn’t found anything? She said something about a job at some agency…”

“Yeah, the Ministry of Peace. But she doesn’t wanna take it. She’s a lazy ass who doesn’t want to work or study. All she thinks about is satisfying her pussy.”

“Honey! How can you talk about your sister like that?”

“Hah!” she scoffed. “If you heard how she talks about me…”

“Why? Did you fight or something?”

“It’s because of Carmen.”

“Carmen? Who’s Carmen?”

“Oh, you don’t know…”

“Nope.”

“Carmen’s this Latina chick she lives with upstairs. A ‘pacifist,’ way older than her, and she can’t stand me. Neither of them can, but her girlfriend especially. They met at the orphanage, and now they’re shacked up. They spend the day rubbing their pussy together”

I was floored. The phone nearly slipped out of my hand. Not so much because of what I heard—I kinda saw it coming—but because of how the sisters were acting toward each other. At this point, with everything else going on, it was the least of my worries. Ten years ago, it would’ve been a huge drama, like when I found out Vicky was into similar stuff. But now? I didn’t care. The main thing was getting money to save Aisha.

“Alright, hon. I’m not getting into what your sister does or doesn’t do. Can you put her on? I’m guessing she’s home…”

“Yeah, she’s home. I can hear both of them laughing their asses off right now. Some party they’re having tonight… If they keep it up and don’t let me sleep, we’re gonna have a real problem. I’ll give ‘em something to cry about.”

“Just put her on, please.”

“Why don’t you call her? You know her number, right?”

“What’s the deal? You don’t even talk to her enough to pass the phone?”

“I have to talk to her, Mom. We live in the same damn house, unfortunately. But I’m not in the mood to go out in the rain and knock on her door.”

“What? You can’t just go upstairs?”

“Oh, you don’t know about the renovation.”

“What renovation?”

“The staircase’s gone. The upstairs isn’t connected to the downstairs anymore. I enter in the usual way, but they built an outdoor staircase to their floor. Honestly, I can go weeks without seeing either of them. Hearing them, though? Oh, I hear them. They’re loud as hell.”

I sighed. Another thing to add to the list of headaches.

“Oh, and by the way,” she continued, “not all of Dad’s savings got wiped out. Angie’s share was frozen by the government, since they were her guardian ‘til she turned sixteen.”

“Yeah, I know. But it’s probably gone too, right?”

“Nope,” she laughed. “They issued some decree saying ‘orphaned’ girls got an extra payout or something, and it wasn’t hit by inflation. The government covered it.”

“Really?”

“Yup. But don’t get your hopes up. The second she turned sixteen, she blew it all on a Caribbean trip with that Latina chick.”

“All of it?”

“Yup, Mom. You don’t know how they burn through cash. It’s like it’s on fire in their hands…”

“Alright, put her on. The cell service here’s crap. We can get calls, but making them? We’re stuck in some ‘roaming’ thing or whatever, and it’s a pain to connect. Better to keep this line.”

“Yeah, but I don’t want her touching my phone. You get me?”

“No, I don’t. Honestly, I’m floored by you two. I’m not crying ‘cause I’m out of tears after everything we’ve been through. I gotta save ‘em for serious stuff. You get *me*?”

“Yeah, but I don’t want her hands on it. Who knows where they’ve been… you know what I mean.”

“I don’t know, and I don’t wanna know, Vicky. And I can’t trust she’ll call me if you ask her. I came to Susa just for this, and I can’t stay forever. I gotta take care of Aisha and the kids, so I need to talk to her *now.*”

“Fine,” she sighed. “But I don’t know if she’ll listen. I’ll go up.”

I heard her put on a raincoat, step outside, and shut the door. Then her heavy steps clanging up what sounded like metal stairs. She rang the bell, and after a bit, I heard this:

“What the hell do you want? Huh? Here to bitch about the noise again?”

“I need to talk to my sister.”

“I don’t know if your sister wants to talk to you.”

“Listen, you dyke, I’m not gonna say it twice. I need to see my sister now*, so put some panties on her and bring her out. You hear me? You get it, bitch?”*

“What’s going on?” Angie had just shown up.

“This damn bulldog wants to see you.”

“What do you want?”

“Mom wants to talk to you. It’s urgent.”

“Mom?”

“Yeah! Olivia! Your mother, in case you forgot. Here!”

“I’m not touching that phone… it stinks of your breath! God, just like you *stink! I can smell you from here! Wash yourself sometime, you nasty bitch!”*

“Mom,” Vicky said to me, “Angie doesn’t wanna talk. Dunno if you heard.”

“Yeah, I heard,” I said, a lump in my throat from everything I was listening to.

“Alright,” Vicky said to Angie, *“but you’re gonna call her now. She’s in a bad signal area and doesn’t have time. She’s got something important to tell you. Important! Know what that word means, you little brat?”*

“I know what it means, you disgusting fatass!” Angie snapped. *“Of course I do!”*

“Then call her. You hear me? Call her now!”

The line cut off, and I tried to calm down. I was in a public square, watching people pass by—anything to avoid thinking about what I'd just heard, 'cause it'd ruin me completely. Women with shopping bags, men in turbans chatting, kids running and laughing… hard to believe this place had been bombed to bits not long ago. The country was slowly piecing itself back together.

But no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't stop thinking about that call and what was going on.

Feminism was out of style. With barely any men left—and the ones still around pushed to the sidelines—nobody bought into that "patriarchy" or "oppressive men" crap anymore. So the left reinvented itself, like always. The new "-ism" was pacifism, and the new enemy to hate was the military.

Pacifists were the new oppressed group. The new "vulnerable" ones and they needed the state's protection. Hell, there was even a "Ministry of Peace"!

The economic crash after the war—where all that money got spent for nothing—made it easy for opportunistic politicians to latch onto a new "cause" to milk. Pacifists were the new "radicals," and apparently Angie's girlfriend was one of them. No doubt she'd manipulated my daughter into hating her sister for being in the military.

Half an hour later, my phone finally rang, and I hit the green button like my life depended on it.

"Hey, Olivia."

Ultra-feminists didn't use family terms. They hated motherhood and family, so they just called their moms by their first names.

"Hey, Angie. Why'd it take so long?"

"Couldn't call earlier. I was… talking with my girlfriend."

"Yeah, Carmen, right?"

“Yup. Got a problem? I bet Vicky told you about her. God knows what that snake said.”

I didn’t take the bait. I was past arguing with my daughters. It wouldn’t help.

“Angie, I’m guessing your sister told you why I’m calling.”

“She didn’t tell me shit. That fatass stormed off after she hung up.”

“Fat… Vicky?”

“You haven’t seen her face?”

“We didn’t use video. The signal’s bad enough just getting audio.”

“God, her voice has changed too. You didn’t notice?”

“No. Guess it’s not as obvious over the phone.”

“She looks like a bulldog, Olivia. Cheeks sagging off her face, I’m telling you.”

“For real?”

“Pretty much,” she sighed. “My sister does *nothing* all day. Stays in bed! How’s she not gonna be fat? She’s so lazy she probably wears diapers to avoid the bathroom.”

“Come on… I don’t think—”

“And she doesn’t even wash. Must think she’s still in that Chinese prison, where she didn’t move or bathe.”

“She’s been back for a while…”

“That’s what I’m saying. But except for eating, she’s still doing the same shit.” She paused. “God, she’s such a militarist. If she hadn’t joined the army, she wouldn’t be like this. She’d have a girlfriend like the rest of us and be happy.”

“Yeah, sure,” I sighed.

“They probably didn’t feed her much in China, so she didn’t change much when she got back. But now? God, you should see her. Eating burgers and ice cream in bed, watching shitty action shows… that damn *Mercenaries* series. You know it?”

“No, Angie. We don’t get that here,” I said, and meant it literally.

“It’s a 500-episode soap opera she’s always watching. Finishes it, starts it over. The OC banned it, but this militarist jerk pirates it and smuggles it in.”

“The OC? You mean the Inquisition?”

“Well, it’s officially the OC-EWM.”

“Right, the Oversight Committee and Early Warning against Machismo. Is’n it?”

“Against Militarism.”

“Oh, got it.”

“We watch love stories, but those bug her.”

“Why? What’s it to her?”

“That’s what I say! But she bitches about our volume. To screw with us, she cranks her *Mercenaries* show to max. Tell me how anyone can stand all that bombing and shooting…”

“Yeah.”

“Carmen says we should report her to the OC for watching illegal shows. But it’s pointless. The military’s still got too much pull. God, there’s still so much to do. Always is!”

“Yup, same old,” I said.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing, nothing.”

“And since she’s home all the time, we’re stuck with her damn *Mercenaries* 24/7. I’m so sick of her.”

“Why doesn’t she go out?”

“Why? ‘Cause she can barely move, Olivia! Why else? She only leaves once a day to walk her nasty dog. And not far—just around the block.”

“Got it.”

“God, that dog’s as fat as she is. A total lardball!”

“The dog?”

“No, her. Well, the dog too. Vicky’s arms are as big as my thighs, and hers… I bet they make her panties custom ‘cause no size fits her. She only wears long skirts ‘cause every pair of pants splits at the seams.”

“I can’t believe it…”

“Believe it,” she sighed. “They had to reinforce her bed ‘cause she was breaking it with her weight. Since she’s in it all day…”

“Come on, Angie, it can’t be *that* bad.”

“God, it is!”

“She told you that?”

“Hah! We don’t talk! I know ‘cause I saw some eunuchs from a furniture store bringing steel beams. Tell me what those are for…”

“Could be for something else.”

“Yeah, right. That’s why they took Tony’s bed out, split in half.”

“Tony’s bed?”

“Yup, Olivia. It’s the one she’s always used. Didn’t want hers.”

“Why not?”

“Well… we got here first, ‘cause she was still in China. And when she came back, she started hating Carmen right away. And me too, but Carmen more. That very night—*that* night—she said she didn’t want anything to do with the upstairs ‘cause it ‘smelled like pussy.’ Her exact words! Like *she* smells any better. You can’t imagine the stench she leaves behind.”

“So that’s why she stayed downstairs, right? And Tony’s room was there…”

“Exactly. She grabbed some of her stuff and moved it down. Hasn’t come up since. Not that I’d let her.”

I wanted to give her a lecture, tell her she shouldn’t treat her sister like that, that she should forgive her and make peace. But would it have helped? I risked her turning on me

and refusing to sign the mortgage. So I kept quiet. I'd bring it up another time.

Anyway, she kept trashing Vicky: "You should see her, Olivia… God, she looks like an old lady. Not even thirty and living like a retiree."

"Well, she kinda is, right?"

"Yeah, sure. Living off that 'post-traumatic stress' excuse. What a load! If she worked and moved more, she wouldn't be so bitter. All those burgers killed her sex drive, and she's jealous I still have mine."

"You mean that bromide they put in meat?"

"Exactly! They need to stop that. Men aren't a threat anymore."

"There's barely any left…"

"That's what I'm saying," she sighed, then added, "So, what's this urgent thing?"

Finally, she calmed down enough to let me talk. But before I could start, she said, "Oh, and you're lucky she went up to tell me."

"Why?"

"'Cause she's so fat, climbing those stairs is a nightmare. Saves us from her nagging."

"The metal stairs…"

"Metal? Nah, they're regular stairs. They just sound like metal 'cause of her weight. God, she's like Godzilla stomping around. Drives me nuts, Olivia! I have to send Carmen to deal with her 'cause she's more diplomatic. Sometimes I wanna kick her down the stairs, I swear."

"Yeah, yeah… Well, she could just call you, right? Save her the climb."

"Nope. We blocked her. If she wants to complain, she's gotta come up. Otherwise, she'd be whining all day."

I sighed. What a pair of sisters…

"Angie, I need to talk to you about money."

"Money?"

"Yeah."

"What's that got to do with me?"

"I need us to mortgage the house."

"What house? *This* house?"

"Yup, our house. I need a loan to pay for Aisha's surgery."

"Who's that?"

"Angie… Aisha's your sister-in-law. Tony's wife, the mother of your nephews."

"Oh, right."

I expected the indifference, but not *this* much. She didn't even remember her name! Things were looking grim.

"Vicky's already said she's on board with signing, so I just need you to agree."

“Wait, wait. I’m not sure I’m following…” I heard a voice in the background—probably her girlfriend listening in. “Can you start from the beginning?” she asked, practically repeating what Carmen was saying.

“Alright,” I sighed. “Since your brother was killed, we’ve got no money, and there’s no widow’s pension here.”

“So you can’t afford to live.”

“We can live, thank God. The goats still give milk, and we sell their meat and hides…”

“Got it. But you can’t afford medical stuff, right?”

“Exactly. Since Tony’s death, Aisha’s real sick and needs urgent surgery. Her disability’s gotten worse, and the doctors say they need to shrink that gland again—the one they reduced before she met your brother. That’s what’s causing it, and…”

I stopped. My daughter was talking to her girlfriend and probably wasn’t listening. I heard them say: *“God, Carmen, I* told *you about it. Don’t act like you didn’t know. I said my brother went Muslim and married a disabled Muslim chick. You don’t remember?”*

The other woman said something I couldn’t make out.

“Yeah, and my mom went to live with them. Where do you think she’s calling from?”

“Right, but didn’t your brother die?”

“Of course he’s dead! You’re not getting it! But his wife’s still alive, and apparently, she’s sick.”

“Olivia, what were you saying?”

I wanted to hang up right then. If I thought things looked bad before, now it was pitch black.

“Angie, I’m getting a loan to pay for her surgery. The house you’re living in is mine, and I have the right to do it.”

“It’s not hers. She’s lying.”

“It *is* mine!” I shouted. “Even though Dad didn’t leave a will—‘cause if he had, we wouldn’t be having this talk—one-third is Tony’s, so we can use his share. Vicky’s got another third, and she’s already agreed. I just need you to say yes.”

“Say yes to what?”

“To mortgaging the house. It’s about getting a loan with the house as collateral.”

“Ask her how she’s gonna pay it back.”

“Olivia, how you gonna pay the loan?”

“Angie, if you want, put your girlfriend on so we don’t need a middleman.”

She went quiet. I kept going: “Look, I don’t know how we’ll pay it back. Honestly, I don’t think we can. All I know is I need that money, and I need it fast.”

“If she can’t pay it, they’ll take the house, and we’ll have to leave.”

“Olivia, I don’t have a job, and Carmen… well, she gets a small stipend for being vulnerable…”

“Vulnerable?”

“Yeah, the military hates us. Pacifists are discriminated against, and the government gives a small grant to PP members.” That’s the Pacifist Party. “She’s one. Well, I am too, but I gotta wait a few years to get mine. It’s to prevent fraud, you know? If they gave it to everyone who joined the party, it’d be a free-for-all, right?”

Funny how the culture of hate found a new target. Now the military—used in the masculine, even though they're all women—hated the pacifists, and vice versa. And since the pacifists were in power, they were quick to hand out perks to their own. Typical left, buying loyalty with other people's money.

"Anyway, if I had the stipend too, maybe we could move somewhere and afford rent. But the way things are…"

"Are you saying no, Angie?"

"Well, I…"

I bet her girlfriend was shaking her head, and my daughter was hesitating.

"Why don't you and your girlfriend get jobs so you can live better?" I asked, pissed. Just a minute ago, she was demanding her sister work and not live off handouts, and now her girlfriend was doing the same, with Angie hoping to follow suit.

"Jobs? There *aren't* any! The damn military started a war against you guys and blew all the money! Don't you know we're in a crisis?"

"Yeah, we're in one too. Thanks to an embargo your country's got on us. If you're such pacifists, why don't you lift it? Then we could trade and things would get better for everyone. Since you couldn't take our minerals, you block us from selling them to whoever we want."

"I don't know about that stuff, Olivia. I can't answer that."

"Fine," I gave up. "Will you sign the mortgage, yes or no? Don't do it for Aisha—you don't know her. Not even for your nephews, who you don't know either. But you remember Tony, right? You loved him a lot. Do it for him. One last goodbye gift."

The Answer

I walked towards the village and couldn't stop crying the whole way, contemplating what my daughters had become. I couldn't stop thinking about everything I had heard.

At times I told myself that I should not have come to Persia. If I had stayed in my home, maybe my two daughters would not have reached the level of enmity they were in. But how was I to know?

At the moment I made the decision, neither of them lived with me. The oldest was already in the army and lived in the barracks. And the youngest had been taken from me.

For her part, Aisha had her sick mother and couldn't count on her sisters to help her either, as they had all already had their children, and logically, they were their priority.

The decision to come was the right one, of course. At that moment it was the best thing I could do. But if I had been there, I was sure that my daughters would not get along so badly. And I am also sure that Vicky would not have fallen into that state of physical degradation apparently she was in.

But it would have been impossible to return, even if I had wanted to. Aisha and my grandchildren needed me, and there was also a war going on.

Yes, I could have gone back when the war ended. Tony was already with his wife... although it is also true that he had to work and during the day my daughter-in-law was alone.

Besides, I thought, if I had gone back, would they have admitted me into my own house? In fact, I would only have suffered, since the character of the two of them was already incorrigible, and I would have left poor Aisha alone.

No. I did well to stay, even if those two were at each other's throats. There was no fixing that.

I was in these thoughts when, finally, someone passed by on the road and took me to the village on his motorcycle. He was a local who lived a few houses away from ours, and he also had the kindness to take me up to the village in the hills.

And as for Angie's decision... The answer was no. She didn't tell me at that moment, because she went through the motions of having to think about it. I only gave her a couple of days, after which I called her again only to get more evasions. And I couldn't wait any longer.

During all those conversations, the girlfriend was on the lookout, and she gave her precise instructions on what to say. Of course, I thought, what a fixation the members of this family had with getting involved with toxic Latinas named Carmen! What a coincidence...

Besides, it was enough for one sister to say yes to something for the other, invariably, to say no, just to be contrary. Again, politicians and their hatreds had pitted two siblings against each other, just as they did in Persia. Another pain to add to the list. And there were already... a few.

So, I got in touch with the one who had already saved Aisha once, to beg her to do it again.

Ms. Arcan

It was the second time I had tried. Since I don't know how to drive motorcycles, I had had to go to Susa in an old car that Tony had in the workshop and was finishing repairing without having fully succeeded. The vehicle ran rather poorly, but at least it ran.

Besides, there was another reason to go by car: the time difference. In fact, the almost twelve hours that separated us from the West, and since I didn't know when that person was going to call me, were the reason why I had to be prepared for her to do so at any time of the day (or night here).

She could call me at six in the morning there, which would be six in the afternoon, but she could also do so during the next sixteen hours, that is, until ten at night, for example, which meant I had to spend the night in Susa, inside the car, until ten in the morning local time. So I came well-equipped with cheese, bread, and honey, and a pillow.

My son had told me about his thing with Judith, and I only knew that, at the time they were together, she was the executive vice president of a multinational company. So I looked for great magnates with that name, and several people came up, although only one with the approximate age she would have had at the time. It couldn't be anyone else.

After talking to many women, I finally managed to get through to her secretary.

"Why do you wish to speak with Mrs. Arcan**?**"

"It's a personal matter."

"I'm sorry, but you'll have to tell me first."

"As I said, it's personal. I must speak only with her."

"Yes, but many people call here, many journalists, who, with the excuse of a 'personal matter,' end up getting to speak with the president. And as you can imagine, she is a very busy person, and she can't waste time attending to everyone. Do you understand me**?**"

"Yes, I understand you. But I don't know you, and I can't and shouldn't mention the reason I need to speak with her. Please tell her to call me at the phone number that appears on the screen."

"Who are you**?** Where are you calling from**?**"

"My name probably won't mean anything to her, so it would be useless to tell you. I am calling from Persia."

"From Persia**?**" she was surprised.

"Yes, and I don't think that detail helps you."

"Well, then, I'm telling you that Mrs. Arcan will not call you. She is a very busy woman."

"Look, it's a matter of life or death."

"Yes. That's what they all say. I'm sorry, but I'm going to hang up. Although not as much as the president, I also have many duties."

"Wait!" I saw that everything was lost, and then I gave it my all:

"Tony."

"Tony?"

"Yes. Just tell Judith that name. And to call me tomorrow around this time. As I said, it's important."

So the next day I went back to Susa. As I said, I arrived in the late afternoon, in case she decided to call at dawn.

I waited patiently inside the car—which, by the way, was incredibly difficult to start—until I finally received a call. Indeed, the woman was impatient and called, perhaps from her house, as soon as dawn broke in the West.

"Who are you?" she asked, as soon as the connection was established. "Why do you want to talk to me?" Her tone was defiant, angry.

"I'm sorry to bother you. I really beg you to forgive me. I have no bad intentions, so you can be at ease about that."

I said that to reassure her, in case she thought I was going to blackmail her. And it must have worked, because her tone changed.

"Alright. Then tell me your name, and why you wish to speak with me."

"My name is Olivia, and I am Tony's mother."

There was silence on the line. After a few seconds, she said:

"Look, your call is completely... strange, to say the least. Please, turn on the video. I need to see you."

I pressed the button that turned on the camera, crossing my fingers that the connection wouldn't be lost. She didn't turn hers on.

"Yes. Of course, it could be. The same color of hair and eyes. And... looking closely... you look a little alike... perhaps in the way you look. Alright. What do you want?"

"Well... I don't know where to start... so many things have happened..."

"I don't have much time, so you'll have to be brief."

I took a breath and set out to summarize as best I could what had happened in all the years that had passed since they last saw each other.

"Well, you see, my son has died."

"He has died?"

"Yes."

I noticed her voice break.

"When?"

"Recently. It was in an unfortunate street altercation he got involved in."

"Wow..."

"You see, he came to live in Persia, as he married a girl from here. A person you know."

"Me?"

"Yes. He told me that you made a significant financial contribution so that this young woman could have an operation. She suffered from a degenerative disease that..."

"Yes, I remember. Are you serious that he married her?"

"That's right. They've had two children, and another on the way. Look," I continued, "if you don't have much time, I don't want to overwhelm you with details."

"Don't worry," her tone was now much more cordial.

"The thing is, Aisha has relapsed. My son's death has affected her in such a way that... well... her health has worsened and she is seriously ill. The doctors have told us that that operation needs to be repeated. Only this time we don't know if, perhaps..." then my voice broke. "We don't know if this time... it will do any good."

I started to cry and then Judith turned on her camera. A woman of about fifty appeared, looking at me with a benevolent face.

"Come on, Olivia. Don't worry. If there's anything I can do..."

After composing myself a bit, I continued:

"Yes. We need money again, and I don't know who else to turn to. You are our last hope," I sighed, and took a deep breath to be able to continue. "And so that you don't mistrust me or my intentions, you can use the same bank account as last time. I have spoken with the

hospital, and they still have the same account number. Just put the patient's name in the concept: Aisha Abdulacid."

Judith looked down. She was writing the name down. Then she looked at me, and after a few seconds, she said:

"Olivia, you can count on me for everything you need. If the worst happens and your daughter-in-law ends up passing away, it certainly won't be because of a lack of money."

I Know a Place

That wasn't the only time I spoke with Judith. From that day on, we had regular conversations, although the limitations of phone coverage prevented us from communicating more.

As she promised, she sent us enough money to start the preparations. In fact, we already had a date for the operation. The rest would have to be paid a few days before it.

The truth is that that infusion of money was a great relief, because we had almost nothing left. That allowed me to go to Susa by taxi, and not have to wait for someone to take me. And of course, it was much more comfortable for Aisha when taking her to and from the hospital, as we had to go and come back many times to do the relevant tests before the operation.

But apparently, the disease was ahead of us and was moving faster than we could handle. Aisha had entered a spiral of discouragement and apathy, and had practically given up the fight.

In reality, she was eagerly longing to be reunited with her husband...

I would tell her, "Aisha, you have to be strong! You have to live, at least for your children! What will become of them, if you are gone?"

But she would only offer a slight melancholic smile, barely able to speak, consumed by extreme thinness. All the bones in her body were visible when I undressed her to wash her, and only her belly stood out, where a baby was trying to continue growing inside her. No one could say that this woman had the splendid figure she once had.

The worst were the nights, when she barely managed to sleep two hours straight. She would remember Tony's death at every moment; she would become delirious, and I would hear her talk to him as if he were there with us. She always had him in her mind, and would talk to him in her dreams, even about intimate things, and sometimes it seemed as if she was making love with him.

At dawn, sadness and desolation would return, and she only seemed to cheer up a little with the closeness of her children, especially with Ahmet, who reminded her so much of her beloved husband.

Poor Aisha was not getting better. She was becoming more and more emaciated and barely ate. There came a time when I feared the worst.

Efrem had told me to let him know at any time of the day or night if her health worsened, and that is what I did.

That night we were with her, along with my grandchildren, in the tent where she always lived with Tony, and then she said to me:

"Don't cry, Olivia. We can't cry today! Karim is waiting for me... He told me this afternoon! And... I am burning with desire to be with him again!"

"No, Aisha! You have to stay with us! You have to be with your children!"

"It can't be... I should have died many years ago, and Karim saved me. Do you remember? But my time had not yet come, because I still had to meet him. I had to live for him... I had to be his!" she grabbed my arm tightly, looking at me intently. "But he is no longer here, and so... my time has come. My mission has been fulfilled," a tear escaped her. "I was born for him, and now he is calling me..."

As soon as she said this, she closed her eyes and began to sing. It was a serene, melodic, and rhythmic song, full of sensitivity and tenderness. Although it was her voice, it didn't sound like she was the one singing. And that was something that made Efrem and me shed the few tears we had left:

I know a place where sadness does not exist,
where birds sing and flowers grow;
where the sun rises every morning,
and spouses love each other in an eternal embrace.
Open your heart, my love,
for today I am coming to take you.
I will take you to a place where we will be together,
where heaven and earth mix,
where everything is joy and color.
I know a place where it dawns early,
where hatred and darkness cannot exist,
where our daughter will be happy.
There we will build a house, bathed in the sun,
on top of a mountain, close to God.
Today is the day of the meeting, the day of the embrace,
the joyful day where there is no more lament.
I will take you to a place where love reigns,
where light reigns, where God reigns.
Open your heart, my love,
for today I am coming to take you.

Dressed in White

Aisha's death was a tremendous blow to our community. There wasn't a more beloved person in the entire tribe, and the news of her passing shocked the whole village.

When they took her to the cemetery, wrapped only in a white shroud, we were barely able to cry anymore. We had no tears left after so many deaths. Only Leila and I did, along with my grandchildren. No one had the strength for even that anymore.

Yes, Leila completely converted and came to love her sister again. Among other things, because she was no longer worthy of envy but of pity.

Efrem, broken by pain, could not officiate the ceremony, and another man from the tribe had to do it. That father was completely devastated, as ungrateful death had taken the daughter he loved the most.

Fulfilling her wish before she died, her husband's grave was opened and the earth was removed until Tony's shroud was visible.

Muslims do not use coffins; their bodies are placed directly in the earth, covered only by their funeral shroud. And there, face down, on top of her husband, Aisha's body was placed, as if both were merging again in an eternal embrace.

I will never forget that emotional and painful scene. There I was, broken by pain at seeing my son's body again, and with my two grandchildren holding my hand, while my heart

broke and my guts were torn apart again. There I was with the two orphans, all three of us dressed in white, the color of Muslim mourning.

Little Ahmet let go of my hand and went to say a final goodbye to his parents, while Nasser, the oldest, said to me:

"Grandma, who will stay with us from now on?"

My grandson always spoke to me in my language. After so much time together, he already knew how to speak it, while I still didn't master his.

"I will be your father and your mother from now on," I replied, wiping away my tears.

"It's not the same," he answered. The boy had inherited the logical thinking of an engineer, like his father.

"Of course it's not!" I replied. "I will be the best grandmother in the world for you, but I can never be a mother, just as your grandfather Efrem can't be the father you have lost."

Indeed, from then on, those two little ones only had their maternal grandfather and me, and we tried, by all means at our disposal, to somehow make up for such an enormous loss.

That day of ill-fated memory in the streets of Susa took the lives of three people; three innocent beings who had done nothing but love. My son died, my daughter-in-law died, and my third grandchild died in his mother's womb.

I am only left with the hope that my other grandchildren, far from the perversion of the West and its culture of hatred, will be able to love and be loved. I, at least, will do everything possible for it to be so.

Marián

It was a few years later when an event occurred that I will never forget as long as I live.

It was October 20th, the anniversary of the day I met Victor. That morning, I woke up with a start. Someone had entered the tent. I looked towards the entrance, and it seemed to me that the curtain covering the access was moving, but I didn't see anyone.

Dawn was breaking, and some rays of light were timidly entering through the gap left by the wooden post that supports the front with the fabric that makes up the wall.

I turned over to try to sleep a little longer, but I couldn't. I felt the intense presence of a being who was looking at me, and at that moment I sat up and saw it.

It was a child-like figure, blurred because it was backlit, with long, blonde hair.

At that moment I looked to my right, and there was Ahmet, sleeping peacefully next to his brother. It wasn't him.

Who was it then? I asked myself. My grandson and I were the only two blonde people in the entire tribe.

Then I got up to look more closely, and when I was next to it I found a beautiful blonde little girl with very long hair and huge, almond-shaped eyes the color of chrysoberyl. A girl about four or five years old who greeted me, saying:

"Hello, Grandma."

My heart skipped a beat and I got so nervous that I felt like crying. However, her face was so friendly, she radiated so much candor, that I immediately calmed down. The girl looked at me intently with a smile, and then I asked her:

"Who are you?"

"I'm Marián."

"Marián?"

"Yes," she replied, and her big eyes opened even wider. They were so huge that it seemed like they were going to pop out of her face. "Come with me," she said, grabbing my hand. "My parents want to greet you."

I let myself be led and we went outside, my heart beating strongly and at full speed. A small breeze was blowing from the east, while the sun's rays were beginning to flood the entire village.

The girl took me with a firm step towards the tent that Karim and Aisha once occupied, and we went in. We passed through the curtain that covered the entrance... and there they were, both of them.

They were embracing, sitting on some cushions, and kissing with great love. As soon as they noticed my presence, they separated slightly, and Marián approached them, sitting next to them. Aisha kissed the girl and Tony waved to me, his wife doing the same moments later.

At that moment I heard a noise behind me. Someone else had also entered the tent. I turned and it was Leila, who, like me, had gotten up and gone outside, without even putting on her *rusari*.

"Hello, Olivia. Did you also see the girl?"

"The girl?"

"Yes, Marián. She was here a moment ago and she asked me to come in."

"Well... she's here..." I turned, pointing to the place where the three of them were... only no one was there anymore. All that could be seen were the trunks that contained some of Tony's belongings, which had now become part of the community.

"I can't explain it..." I whispered, looking at the floor, and Leila made a similar gesture. We went outside, and there was no one there either.

"She gave me this," she told me. "Do you know what it is?"

At that moment my heart skipped a beat. Aisha's sister showed me on her outstretched hand a very precious object that had belonged to my family for a long time, and that I had given to my eldest son when he made his first communion.

It was a small silver medal with the image of Our Lady of the Mount Carmel on one side and the Sacred Heart of Jesus on the other.

At that moment, I started to cry. And I did it because then I was certain that what had happened had not been a dream, nor was I a sleepwalker.

Tony had left that medal in the drawer of his nightstand when he came to Persia, and my intention was to return it to him when I came to live with them. Indeed, when I packed my suitcase with my things to come here, it was the first thing I wanted to put in my luggage... but I couldn't find it. I asked Vicky, I asked Angie through a message I left at the orphanage... neither of them had seen it. It had disappeared! I looked for it all over the house, turning everything upside down, and in the end I gave up.

How could Leila have that little medal? How was it possible that she had also dreamed of a child named Marián?

The little girl was the third generation after Irnma's mother, and, like her great-grandmother, she had the gift of appearing to the living. And she turned out to be a mischievous angel, because that October 20th she also appeared to her grandfather Efrem and two more aunts,

in addition to Leila. Both the grandfather and Amira, her other aunt, ignored the vision and did not accompany the girl to see her parents, although they later told us about it.

The other aunt to whom my granddaughter appeared... yes, it was to her aunt Vicky.

My daughter called me very disturbed the next day, thinking she had seen the child she aborted. A blonde little girl with Tony's features, who could very well be hers. She calmed down somewhat when I assured her that she had not seen her daughter, but her niece.

I urged her, if she was so afraid, to return to the faith and say some prayers for the soul of that child she murdered. Not in vain, Father David once told me that some aborted children could not enter heaven because of the resentment they had towards their parents for having deprived them of the opportunity to live. Children who on many occasions appeared to their parents in various ways.

Logically, a 3 or 4-month-old fetus is not aware of what is being done to it, but its soul, when it resurrects, does know. Therein lies the great difference between Marián and Vicky's daughter. The former had been a desired daughter, and the love of her parents when they conceived her was enough for her to enter heaven. She could only blame God for her premature death, but He had already given her the greatest dose of glory in Paradise, the natural destiny of all creatures. However, my other granddaughter had not been desired and her mother had murdered her. In those circumstances, only the merits and love that she could have given during her earthly life could have guaranteed her that paradise, and that was something that was denied to her by not having been given the opportunity to live. The resentment, therefore, would have to be enormous, and only the repentance and a plea for forgiveness on the part of her mother could make that soul turn to God, who, in his infinite wisdom, had arranged that salvation can only occur with the collaboration of creatures. Therefore, only the repentance and a plea for forgiveness to the daughter and a fervent prayer to God imploring His mercy for the crime committed, could obtain the forgiveness of the little girl, and that she could enter heaven. And, in some way, stop the remorse and restlessness that many mothers suffer after an abortion.

Certainly, God doesn't do anything without reason, and if he allowed little Marián to do those pranks, it was for a reason. My daughter was never the same after that.

Vicky, the rebel, now hated lesbianism so much that she ended up rebelling this time against women, and, although she never admits it, I am perfectly aware when I talk to her... that she is with a man! And a man who, by the tone of his voice, is not exactly a eunuch.

The scare that girl gave her made her literally jump out of bed, and she lost all those pounds she had gained, ending up as she was before. The senseless thing she did by voluntarily sterilizing herself in the past was beyond remedy, but at least now she can normalize her life. I pray every day for her to get married and finally get on track, and I trust that she will.

Since that day, that little medal hangs from my neck and I never take it off. It is the irrefutable proof that miracles exist—I had already witnessed one in Medjugorje—, and the

token that I hope to one day hand over to its rightful owner, when, God willing, I also reunite with him.

The End

Today I am here, sitting on the veranda, watching my grandchildren play with their cousins, contemplating the same sunset that the Sumerians contemplated at the dawn of civilization 6,000 years ago. I wonder how many women before me have sat in this same place crying for the loss of their husbands, their children, or their grandchildren, in the countless battles that have been fought here since then.

I am approaching old age, and this type of thought is what a person like me usually has. Remembering the past, over and over again. It is common in people who have lived so much, who have had so many experiences, who have had so many things happen to them, as have happened to me.

That's why, after so many deaths and so much suffering, I often wonder if it wouldn't have been better to say no to Lucy that afternoon, when she invited me to go to the Khan to meet Victor. I would have saved myself many disappointments, that's the truth.

But despite everything, I always end up thinking the same thing: if I had done that, I would have given up living life to the fullest, that is, I would have avoided suffering enormously, yes, but I also would have missed out on knowing what it is to love to the extreme. Because that is what living life is, and not the substitute that is "lived" now in the West.

Yes. If I had stayed at home that afternoon, Aisha would not have died devastated by pain with my granddaughter in her womb. But she also would not have been able to enjoy a husband as wonderful as Tony was. Besides, the truth is, she would have died much earlier from her illness without having known love.

Yes. If I had been a coward, if I had not left my house, I would not have gone through and suffered a war, but I would have had a life like the one the people I left in the West have now. An insubstantial, sweetened, empty, sad, and lonely life where love doesn’t exist.

If I had stayed at home and not chosen love, I might have ended up like those women, that is, alone, bitter, and frustrated, blaming men for my misfortune, consumed by hedonism, and without any existential project.

Because certainly, all those disappointments, all that bitterness, all the sorrows I have gone through in my life vanish like the morning dew when the sun rises, like the fog when the wind blows, as soon as I see my grandchildren laugh, run, and jump.

Yes, it was worth it to meet Victor, to meet Tony, to meet Vicky, and to meet Angie. And also, of course, it was worth it to meet Aisha, the angel who *was the joy of our hearts, the pearl of our family, the star who guided us, the star who illuminated our nights, the flower who brightened the desert, the water who gave it life, and the pattern who marked the course of our lives*.

A man with a big white beard saved my husband and introduced him to the faith. Although so many years have passed, I remember it as if it had been this morning, the day we confessed on the esplanade of Medjugorje. Despite the intense pain I have for having lost them, I am somehow consoled by the thought that another man with a white beard—Cyrus—

somehow saved my son, by dying a martyr for defending Christians. Yes, that is my consolation. And I know that he is now with his daughter and with his wife, who, being an angel as she was, can be nowhere else but in heaven.

I have the complete certainty that she, along with her beloved husband and my very loved son, are now watching their children jump, laugh, and frolic, from the kingdom where the sun never sets, where everything is joy and jubilation, where everything is love and happiness.

Aisha and Karim, Karim and Aisha, I am sure that they are there right now, loving each other intensely, as they always did. A place to which, God willing, I will also arrive one day to reunite with those I love to keep loving them, and to greet Marián again. What a big hug we'll share when we see each other!

THE END

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